



**Boaz Berney**  
Historical flutes

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## FAQ

### Renaissance flutes

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### **Q: What is a Renaissance flute?**

**A:** A Renaissance flute is a transverse flute with a cylindrical bore and six finger holes and was probably in use from the late fifteenth to the second half of the seventeenth centuries.

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### **Q: Are there any such instruments surviving?**

**A:** There are over fifty such flutes surviving, the majority of which are in Italian collections, with some flutes in museums in Brussels, Vienna, Gratz, Berlin and St. Petersburg)see my [list of surviving Renaissance flutes](#)). Almost all of the surviving originals are of the tenor and bass size - hardly any instruments smaller than a tenor has survived. This could indicate that they were less frequently used, but might be that the smaller instruments were more easily lost or broken.

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### **Q: What sizes of flutes are used in a consort?**

**A:** From various historical sources we know that these instruments were made in three sizes: a bass in g, a tenor in d' and a descant in a'. In a flute consort one would use four instruments, either a bass, two tenors and a descant or a bass and three tenors. The range of the bass is two octaves, g-g'', and the range of the tenors is two and a half octaves, d'-a'''. This large range, which is quite unusual for an instrument of the enaissance, makes playing the top part of the consort on a tenor instrument possible, and actually is recommended in some sources.

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## **Q: Of which types of wood are the originals made?**

**A:** The originals are made from a variety of woods available to the makers of the time. Most of the instruments are made of boxwood and some are made in various fruitwoods such as plum or pear. There is evidence that they were also made of more expensive materials such as ivory and exotic woods. In the inventory of Henry VIII there are about seventy transverse flutes mentioned, among which are ones made in ebony and decorated with silver rings and ones of ivory and gold. These were, however, exceptional instruments made for royalty, and probably do not represent the type of instrument commonly used by a professional musician. Ninety-nine percent of tenor flutes were made in one piece with no decorative turning, and most of the basses were made in two parts with a brass or horn ring added at the socket end to reinforce it.

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## **Q: What is the pitch of surviving Renaissance flutes?**

**A:** At first glance, it might seem that the group of fifty-odd flutes are made in different and randomly chosen pitches. However recent research into the pitches most commonly used at the time, in addition to a comparative study of those instruments, shows that most of them can be divided into four groups of pitches, all of which are related. The largest group of instruments is pitched at  $a=405-408$ . The next one is of instruments exactly half a tone above, somewhere between  $a=425$  to  $a=428$ . There are two more, smaller groups of instruments both half a tone and a whole tone under 408. All of these low-pitched instruments were made by the Lyon family of flute makers, the Rafis. There are hardly any flutes pitched higher than 428 and never in high pitches such as 460, a typical pitch for recorders, cornets and dulcian. We can assume that flutes were considered as being a whole tone under the higher pitched instruments, although surprisingly none of the written sources mentions this.

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## **Q: How is a Renaissance flute tuned?**

**A:** The Renaissance flute is tuned in a d-Dorian (d minor with a lower 6th) mode. The temperament in which it is tuned in is closest to d just minor, with a pure fifths d-a and e-b.

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## **Q: What type of music can I play in a Renaissance flute consort?**

**A:** Most of the repertoire of the sixteenth century does not mention a specific instrumentation or even an instrumental performance at all. There is, however, much evidence showing that musicians at the time played a lot of vocal music, particularly in the first half of the sixteenth century.

In any case, flutes always play the music an octave higher than written, thus sounding in the four foot range. From my experience, based on playing in a consort as well as on historical sources, pieces in G-Dorian or G-Mixolidian modes work best in a Renaissance consort. Pieces in D-Dorian can work as well, although they have a tendency to lie low for the instruments, especially the tenor and bass parts. Pieces in A-Aeolian can sound beautiful,

although they require more work, in terms of intonation, and are a bit more difficult since the tonic, A, is one of the weakest notes on the bass. F or C (Phrygian or Ionian) often go down to F in the bass or C in the tenor, which is beyond the range of the instrument. A good way to tell whether the part in question could be played on a tenor or a bass traverso is by looking at the original clefs of the piece. Clefs in Renaissance music often indicate a certain range, since the musicians and printers of the time tried to avoid using ledger lines, and so any given clef stands for a range of about an octave and a half. Parts written in the G<sub>2</sub> clef (normal violin clef) are very high when played an octave higher, are possible to play on a d-tenor, but would be more easily played on an descant in a. Parts in C<sub>1</sub>, C<sub>2</sub> or C<sub>3</sub> would be very convenient on the tenor. C<sub>4</sub> can be possible unless it goes below the lowest line, i.e. below d, but it is not the best range for the tenor. One can try playing this clef on the bass, as it is often the bass line of three part pieces. F<sub>3</sub> works very well on the bass and so does the normal bass clef F<sub>4</sub>, unless it goes below the G. F<sub>5</sub> clef is only used rarely and is, of course, too low for the bass flute. You should bare in mind, when playing music from modern edition, that often the editors will change the original clefs into modern ones without telling you, or even worse, will transpose the pieces to a different tonality. Playing from a good scientific edition, or a facsimile is therefore highly recommended.

### Clefs and their typical ranges



In General, Franco - Flemish compositions work better in a traverso consort, then Italian. The compositions of Josquin, Agricola, de la Rue, from the first generation of Franco-Flemish composers or Jenequin, Sermisy and Compere from a later period are very vocal, and work very well on traversos.

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## Q: When did they stop using Renaissance flutes?

A: It is difficult to say when exactly the Renaissance flute fell out of use and why, but the latest source that talks about the traverso consort is Mersenne in 1636. There are some seventeenth century compositions that specify 'Traversa' or 'Flauto Traverso', all from Germany, before 1650. The latest use of the instrument I could find was in the works of the Leipzig Thomaskantor Sebastian Knupfer (1633-1676), writing pieces for lрге ensembles, including the Renaissance flute as late as the 1660's.

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## Q: What pitch should I chose for my Renaissance flute?

A: This depends on the possibilities you have to use your flute, and what pitch you are most likely to play Renaissance music were you live and work. In general, the instruments sound better at the lower pitches, 408 or 415. If you are only thinking about consort playing, it is worth your while to get a complete consort at original pitch a=405, as they really sound the best at that pitch. 415 is a more practical compromise, which will also enable you to play with other instruments without having to re-tune strings and so on. An other advantage of this pitch is that you can also play together with higher pitch instruments: Cornets, dulcians and recorders, often made in 466. in that case one would either have to transpose the flute part a

whole tone higher, or have the other instruments transpose down.

A=440 is useful in case you want to play with other wind instruments pitched at modern pitch, and I was looking for a long time for originals which are closer to this pitch (such as the Verona [Bassano](#) and [Schnitzer](#) consorts), and could be re-calculated to sound well in modern pitch as well.

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## Further Reading

For information about the Renaissance flute and its usage in the sixteenth century see Anne Smith: 'Die Renaissancequerflöte und ihr Musik, ein Beitrag zur Interpretation der Quellen', *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis*, 2 (1978), 9-78. English translation (partly) in John Slum: 'The early flute' (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992), 11-34. See also Howard Mayer Brown: 'Notes (and transposing notes) on the Transverse flute in the early sixteenth century', *Journal of the American Musical Instruments Society*, 12 (1986), 5-39.

For information about the Bassanos see David Lsocki: *Bassanos: Venetian Musicians and Instrument makers in England, 1531-1665* (Ashgate Publishing Company, 1995). For dating of some of the instruments: Maggi Lynden-Jones: "A Checklist of Woodwind Instruments marked !!" in *Galpin Society Journal*, 1999, 243-280.

For a more complete bibliographic list concerning the Renaissance flute please check [Luca Verzulli's Renaissance flute page](#) and his [bibliographical list](#).

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