

Native Flutes and Extended Techniques

By Alberto Almarza

"Music is the sum total of scattered forces... it has been turned into a speculative song! I much prefer the notes coming from the flute of an Egyptian shepherd: he contributes to the landscape and hears harmonies ignored by our treatises..."

Claude Debussy, 1901

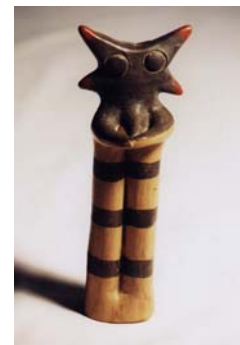
The flute is one of the most varied and widespread instruments in the world, going back tens of thousands of years in many societies. As a result of the multiple types of flutes and the diversity of their musical and social role throughout the world, an amazing repertoire of timbres and playing techniques have been developed, preserved by flute players of native cultures. Many of these techniques arose from the desire to evoke nature, imitating birdsongs, wind and water. Others came into being as an attempt to produce sounds that would have healing powers and communicate with sacred spirits.

The following is a list of some of the most common extended techniques and examples of their use in world flute music.



Multiphonics: technique that allows the flutist to produce several sounds simultaneously. The fascination with multiple sounds is as old as the flute itself. From double to sextuple flutes, they can be found everywhere.

This circular pan flute from Thailand and a double recorder from Mexico are good examples of instruments designed to produce chords.



Circular pan flute, Thailand

Ritual double recorder, Mexico

Circular Breathing: breathing and blowing at the same time. A technique which is thousands of years old and common throughout the world, it has only recently been introduced to Western music. In addition to the flute, it is used by many other wind instruments.



Bansuri, India

Microtones: refers to the use of intervals smaller than a half step. With the exception of the Western modern flute, every other flute in the world is designed as a non-tempered instrument and uses microtonal intervals for tuning and playing.

An elegant example is the Indian transverse flute *Bansuri*. The player uses the middle segment of his fingers to cover the holes, rotating the fingers to bend the pitch.



Whistle Tones: produced by blowing extremely slow air into the flute. Again, we find many instruments that were especially made to create very soft, high-pitched notes.

A notable example is this ceremonial flute/sculpture from Mexico.

Ceremonial vessel flute, Mexico



Color Variation: includes "airy tone," "white sound," "reed sound," singing and playing, etc. All of these sounds and techniques can be found in many different traditions of flute playing.

The Persian *Ney*, one of the oldest known flutes, is one example of an instrument designed to produce a remarkable array of different colors.

Ney, Iran

To summarize, most of what we refer to as "extended techniques" in Western flute music have been part of traditional music from around the world for thousands of years. It is only recently that we have begun to acknowledge the enormous influence of world music on our own Classical tradition. As we explore the relationship between music of the world and contemporary Western music, we discover that we are not isolated; rather, our music has been enriched by that of other cultures. Flutists and composers today are enhancing our musical experience by drawing from this remarkable palette of sounds and techniques and, in the process, demonstrate that the power of musical experience is universal.