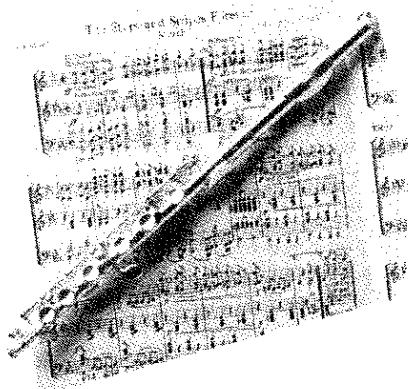


Kenneth Bell

The Piccolo

A guide to stress-free doubling



The piccolo is an instrument which produces extremes of reaction amongst flute players – you either thoroughly enjoy playing it or you hate it; very few are indifferent to it.

Amongst young players, I have learned from experience to be wary of those who say they love playing the piccolo, for their enthusiasm is only seldom matched by ability and this is an instrument which in the wrong hands can wreak havoc, devastating a band to an extent completely out of proportion to its physical size! At the other extreme we have those who suffer from *piccolophobia*, the symptoms of which are an irrational fear of an inanimate object and complete loss of confidence in their playing ability and sense of pitch when that object is in their hands. Both these situations can be remedied, and I hope to present some ideas in this article, based on my own playing and teaching experience, which can help establish a more positive attitude towards the piccolo amongst those intimidated by it and develop greater musical awareness in the playing of those who already enjoy playing it but may not be achieving the best results from it.

Position

Before considering the instrument itself, a word on the position of the piccolo player in the band or orchestra. All professional flute players are expected to be able to double on the piccolo as necessary, but in any professional band or orchestra there will be a piccolo specialist, a principal player who has specialised in the study of the smaller instrument and is an expert in his field. This applies more to orchestras

than to bands as a great deal of band repertoire calls upon any member of the flute section to play piccolo as required although the increasing prominence of symphonic band repertoire in programming these days means that many bands now have an orchestral-style section of Flute 1, Flute 2 and Flute/Piccolo. If you are a flautist who prefers sectional playing to leading or solo playing, then specialising in piccolo is probably not for you – it requires a good deal of confidence in your playing ability to consistently produce what the score requires. Having said that, any flautist with aspirations to play at professional level must have a working knowledge of the piccolo and be prepared, if not necessarily keen, to play it.

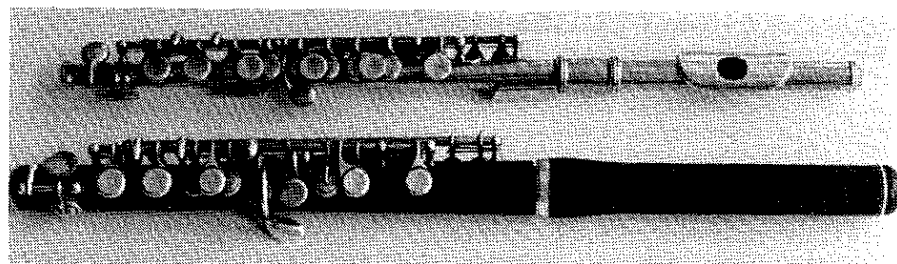
The Instrument

Theoretically, the ideal piccolo to complement the Boehm flute should have a cylindrical body and parabolic headjoint but in practice an instrument with a conical bore and cylindrical headjoint (like a simple-system flute, but with Boehm mechanism) is the preferred piccolo of most players. Some good cylindrical-bore metal piccolos have been made, but the conical bore wooden instrument is generally considered to have a better overall sound, easier high register and better intonation. To confuse the matter, some very fine silver piccolos have been made with a conical bore (particularly by Haynes of Boston) but the vast majority of metal piccolos are cylindrical and there are a lot of student model piccolos of this type around which have done nothing to endear the instrument to young players. Most orchestral piccolo specialists will have at least two instruments which they use depending on the requirements of any piece, for a piccolo with a fine low register

may not be so satisfactory or responsive at the top of its range. Occasionally one comes across a really fine piccolo which can handle anything you may wish to play on it, but such instruments are few and far between, and even similar instruments by the same maker may be markedly different. I myself use two instruments, one English and one German and both over 60 years old – a good piccolo will last a very long time if looked after.

Choice

For the student or non-specialist player there is a good choice of comparatively inexpensive instruments available at the present time. A conical bore wooden instrument is the best choice for what might be called general-purpose playing and a metal headjoint can make changing from flute to piccolo easier for the player who only uses the smaller instrument occasionally. The most popular student model piccolo of recent years has a plastic conical body and silver-plated head and is a very good starting point for the aspiring player. Indeed, for the occasional player a plastic bodied instrument avoids worrying about splits and cracks, but be wary of piccolos which have plastic heads as well as bodies as these rarely blow very satisfactorily. Good older piccolos can be picked up on the secondhand market, but be careful that any such instrument is not high pitch or in the old military band D flat pitch (having said that, a D flat piccolo can be a useful asset for the full-time band player). Apart from the split E mechanism, the range of keywork options found on modern flutes is not found on piccolos, which tend to be pretty much standard in specification. Cylindrical piccolos extended down to C have been made and some composers, most notably



Cocus wood piccolo by Rudall, Carte & Co., London (c. 1920) and silver conical bore D flat piccolo by Haynes of Boston (c. 1940), probably acquired during RAF Central Band's World War II USA tour.

Verdi and Britten in *Billy Budd*, have written for such an instrument

To sum up, for occasional doubling (or if resources are limited) a conical bore wooden piccolo, or wood/plastic bodied instrument with a metal headjoint, will produce much better results than a cylindrical metal piccolo or all-plastic instrument; for the aspiring specialist it will be necessary to invest in at least one top-quality instrument, possibly with an alternative headjoint.

Approach and Practice

The key to constructive study of the piccolo is to remember that its full name is *flauto piccolo*, small flute, and the word 'flute' is much more important than the word 'small'. Many players will practise the piccolo when they are required to play it, and limit such practice to whatever band or orchestral part has been thrust upon them; if they are conscientious about their flute practice they will have a daily regime of long notes, scales, exercises etc, all of which can be transferred to the piccolo with only very minor modifications. Any player's ability on the piccolo is determined by their ability on the concert flute - if the basic foundations of flute playing are not secure, any shortcomings will be exposed even more in their piccolo playing. I have come across young players who decide that the answer to escaping from the anonymity of being stuck in the middle of a large flute section is to obtain a piccolo - a dangerous mistake if the reason for their lack of prominence in the section is limited ability. The piccolo player in any band or orchestra has to be on a par with all the other principal players and the instrument must be practised on a daily, systematic basis if you are intending to play it seriously.

A common misconception amongst both flautists and musicians in general is that the piccolo is not an instrument capable of beauty or expression, that it only exists for brilliance and effect. Whilst the piccolo is at its most prominent when it is being (hopefully) brilliantly effective, it can also be played with great charm and musicianship - just listen to Vivaldi's concerti (originally for soprano recorder), Variation VIII of Elgar's *Enigma* or almost any Shostakovich symphony. As on the flute, finger technique is established and developed through the practise of scales, daily exercises and studies; tone quality and intonation, again as with the flute, are dependent on good breath and embouchure control. On the concert flute many playing faults can be traced to bad posture and hand positions (and thus a poor physical relationship between the player and the instrument) and the same applies to the piccolo, although to a slightly lesser extent because of the smaller size and weight of the instrument. The most common complaint levelled against piccolo players is



that of poor intonation; this may be the fault of the instrument itself (remember what I said in the previous section about cheap cylinder bore metal piccolos) but may well be accounted for by the way the player is holding the instrument. To elaborate, as the embouchure hole in the headjoint of the piccolo is smaller than that of the concert flute, if it is too covered by the lower lip because of incorrect alignment of the body and headjoint or because the whole instrument is being held turned back towards the player it will deaden and flatten the sound even more so than on the larger instrument.

Paradoxically, this usually results in sharpness of playing, the reason being that when the first octave A is tuned it is flat and so the headjoint is pushed right in and the instrument is put out of tune with itself, getting sharper as it gets higher. As the high notes on the piccolo are the ones that get noticed the player is branded as playing sharp when in fact the overall tendency of their pitch is towards flatness in the lower and middle octaves. When practising, ensure that you are not over-covering the embouchure hole, using a mirror if it helps, and that you can play slow scales over the whole range of the instrument without marked changes in tone quality or pitch. The actual physical blowing of the piccolo compared to the flute requires a faster air stream, effected by increased abdominal support and a slightly reduced embouchure gap between the lips. The lips must be firm but not tight - firmness is compatible with flexibility, tightness is not.

Up at the Top

The top octave of the instrument tends to cause people (both playing and listening) a certain amount of trauma. From the player's point of view, remember that the top of the piccolo's range is used to produce brilliant effects in the band or orchestra and so is by its nature loud and penetrating. That is not to say that you should not be able to play quietly up at the top, and indeed some composers ask for musical feats verging on the impossible up there in terms of dynamics; the embouchure flexibility required to achieve quiet, high playing is most effectively achieved through harmonic exercises and alternative fingerings can help tremendously (see Trevor Wye's excellent *Piccolo Practice Book* for a comprehensive table of these).

Practising high piccolo passages can be extremely taxing for both the player and their immediate neighbours and so is to be tackled with some discretion. As on the flute, tone quality is built from the low register upwards, so any problems in the top octave can almost certainly be traced to shortcomings in the lower registers.

What study and practice material should be used for the piccolo? The answer is anything that you use in your flute practice - studies and pieces that do not rely excessively on low C and C sharp and orchestral excerpts specifically for the instrument. Baroque sonatas can make good study material, as can many 20th century pieces - the first movement of the Ibert Concerto works very well on piccolo! Don't neglect to practise changing from flute to piccolo and vice versa within a piece, especially as when the part is for 3rd Flute/Piccolo you can find yourself jumping from the top of the piccolo to the low register of the flute.

The Piccolo in the Band

In orchestral music the piccolo player has to stick to what the composer presents them with virtually all the time, even if it is not particularly idiomatically written for the instrument. In the wind band the situation is slightly different. I apply orchestral rules to symphonic band repertoire, as the composers and arrangers of such music generally have a pretty good idea of what they are doing when it comes to scoring. In intermediate level music there is room for a bit of 'customising' of parts on many occasions, and this also applies to older military band arrangements which were written to be played by bands with non-standard instrumentation and of varying size. Very often in such music, to avoid too complex a score and allow for missing instruments, the piccolo may well simply be doubling the flute(s) in the forte passages. This is fine most of the time, but use your musical judgement to decide when *not* to play if it appears unnecessary or disruptive rather than helpful to the overall effect. Likewise, be prepared to add piccolo even if it is not written for, to help out an awkward bit of writing at the top of the flute range or to add a bit of interest to what may be an uninspired piece of scoring.

In other words, don't feel obliged to play everything on the page in front of you unless it is a solo or the piece is very specific in its scoring. Whatever you are playing, be aware of what is going on around you and how the piccolo fits into the overall texture. When you ride above the texture, make the most of it; don't let the piccolo intimidate you - rise to its challenge and enjoy it!

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