

The new Anton Braun piccolo to low C

By Klaus Dapper

Until now the range of the piccolo has not usually extended below D. While the range of old-style 19th century flutes was extended down to C, and later to B (sometimes lower), old-style piccolos did not go below D. However, there were already a small number of piccolos that went down to C (or lower). Since this time a number of works have been written that require an extended lower register in the piccolo. The following is a brief, incomplete overview of orchestral works with this requirement.

Low C is needed in:

Giuseppe Verdi: *Il Trovatore*, Act IV (1853)

Giuseppe Verdi: 'Lux Aeterna' from the *Requiem* (1874)

Gustav Mahler: First and second symphonies (1888 and 1894)

Ottorino Respighi: Symphonic poem *The Fountains of Rome* (1916)

Arnold Schoenberg: *Wind quintet Op. 26*, second movement (1924)

Benjamin Britten: *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1946)

Benjamin Britten: *Billy Budd* (1951)

Low C-sharp is needed in:

Giuseppe Verdi: *Sicilian Vespers*, overture (1855)

Gustav Mahler: *Third symphony* (1895)

Richard Strauss: *Daphne* (1938)

The invention of the Boehm flute revolutionised the development of flute playing, but strangely the acceptance of the Boehm piccolo was slower than that of the concert flute. Theobald Boehm was not particularly interested in the piccolo. He suggested to Thomas Mollenhauer, who had worked in his workshop from 1863 to 1864, that he work on improving the Boehm piccolo, as he was not totally satisfied with the instrument's playing qualities. In France too, where in the second half of the nineteenth century top-quality Boehm flutes were made, the Boehm piccolo lagged behind the concert flute. Maybe it was the scant availability of good Boehm piccolos or maybe their high price, but in any case, around 1900 a number of flautists played on old-system five- or six-keyed piccolos alongside their Boehm concert flutes. Most of them had after all learnt to play on old-system flutes, so they were still familiar with the fingerings. But then there was the problem regarding the above-mentioned repertoire, so Boehm flute players needed Boehm piccolos with a downward extension in range.





Piccolo to C, anonymous, probably German, probably late nineteenth century, cocuswood, ivory headjoint, nickel silver keys. Dayton C. Miller Collection, Library of Congress, Washington.

It is not known how many flute makers made Boehm piccolos down to low C. At any rate, because of the large tone holes in Boehm piccolos, downward extension of the range was problematic. This may well have been why only very few such instruments came up for sale. An early Boehm piccolo down to low C was made by William S. Haynes in the USA. It dates from the 1890s, before W. S. Haynes went independent and set up his own company. In the mid-20th century Rudall Carte & Co. Ltd. in London made some (cylindrical) low-C metal Boehm piccolos (see illustration). Albert Cooper, who in his time at Rudall Carte was entrusted with

making the low-C piccolo, made four or five low-C piccolos shortly before retiring from flute-making. Three (conical) low-C wooden piccolos by Hans Reiner (GDR) were made, and two of them survive.

Flute players seem to agree that the problem with all low-C piccolos made so far (both conical and cylindrical) is that they are not suitable for daily use. They provide the sought-after bottom two notes, but restrictions have had to be taken into account. In the first octave there are often tonal problems, especially with conical piccolos. In the difficult third octave there are problems of intonation and response, as well as unstable notes, and with cylindrical piccolos there are also tonal problems.

Many orchestral flautists are still put in an embarrassing position when one of the works requiring a low C or C sharp is programmed. With 'impossible' notes one can sometimes 'cheat', by playing the passages an octave higher, or switching to the flute, or swapping notes with a colleague in the flute section, but these tactics are not always possible. Billy Budd includes a passage in which the piccolo and a singer perform as an exposed duo over a delicate string underlay. In this passage the composer calls for low C and C-sharp, and as this section showcases the piccolo there is no alternative. When such a piece is programmed the piccolo player will scour the international flute-playing community well in advance for one of the very few players who own such an exotic instrument and are prepared to loan them out. In the *Piccolo Practice Book*, Trevor Wye and Patricia Morris recommend playing the passage on the flute in (high) G, which is equally hard to get hold of and is usually imperfect, saying that 'the conductor just might not notice!'

The German piccolo specialist Anton Braun has for several years been addressing this issue. His goal was to make a low-C piccolo which, apart from extending the range down to C, was in no respect inferior to low-D piccolos. In 2009 Billy Budd

Anton Braun with his daughter Antonia in their workshop.



Further information:
www.braunflutes.com



Cylindrical piccolo to C by Rudall, Carte & Co. Ltd., London, early 1960s, silver. Private collection.

was staged at the Frankfurt Opera. Because of the passage in question a Rudall Carte low-C piccolo had been loaned from England. The flautist Rolf Bissinger, who was entrusted with this part, is an old friend of Anton Braun—indeed, the Braun flute came into being through collaboration with him. He asked Anton Braun to make him a low-C piccolo that worked as well as his trusty Braun piccolo as soon as possible. In March 2010 *Billy Budd* was again on the programme, and the instrument was to be ready by then at the latest. The commissioned instrument was born through months of intensive cooperation between flautist and flute maker, and it was completed to schedule. At the end of the 2010 *Billy Budd* run the conductor commented positively on the tonal qualities of the newly developed instrument. The new piccolo was from then on successfully used for several weeks in the daily operatic schedule, during which time the orchestral musicians were very positive in their evaluation of the instrument.

In order to also test the instrument's viability in a symphony orchestra a second low-C piccolo was sent to Michael Hasel, who played it in Berlin Philharmonic concerts. The final modifications were undertaken in collaboration with Michael Hasel. It was also a commission from Michael Hasel and the latter's help in the design process that led to the first Braun low-D piccolo – an instrument he has now been playing for over twenty-five years.

By October 2010 everyone involved was finally completely satisfied. The low-C piccolo was a finished product and the target had been achieved, so the time had come for the instrument to be officially presented to the flute world. Two short concert clips of Michael Hasel playing his low-C piccolo can be seen at www.braunflutes.com/piccolo.htm.

The second video clip demonstrates the impressive tonal match when the line is passed back and forth between flute and piccolo.

The original remit was to extend the range down to low C without renouncing any of the customary playing qualities. What had not been foreseen, however, was the fact that the extension of the tube created additional positive qualities. Anton Braun's low-C piccolo makes a bigger sound than the low-D piccolo—a sound closer to that of the concert flute, and its differing overtone structure gives it an extremely attractive third octave. A further special feature of the low-C piccolo is the fact that, as with most other woodwind instruments, the change in register from first to second octave no longer takes place at the end of the tube, thus moderating the register break and giving the new low-C piccolo a particularly balanced sound. An additional bonus with this little octave flute is the fact that the extension of the range down to C now gives piccolo players unrestricted access to the entire recorder and flute repertoires. 

Klaus Dapper lives in Duisburg. He plays the flute (all sizes from piccolo to bass) as well as the clarinet and saxophone and has played in ensembles from jazz bands to symphony orchestras. He has written tutors for the flute and the saxophone which are hugely successful in Germany. Klaus is a frequent contributor to German woodwind publications.

