



Piccolo Pointers

By Nan Raphael

The piccolo is truly a distinct instrument and not just a shorter version of the flute. Many fine flutists don't play piccolo well, and the reverse is also true, but it is common for flutists to be required to double on piccolo, especially in military bands. John Philip Sousa's *Stars and Stripes Forever* requires piccolos and occasionally a work has two separate piccolo parts. One example is Ron Nelson's *Aspen Jubilee Overture*. There are also occasions when

a player has both piccolo and flute parts on the same piece.

For a musician to become accomplished on both instruments requires diligent practice on each instrument, but anyone who focuses on piccolo will find that the fullness and clarity of the flute sound in the lower registers suffers first. In time the sound in all registers may become constricted, but the piccolo playing will increase endurance and the dynamic range on the flute. It is difficult to play a piccolo softly, in tune, and with control, but the best players can diminuendo to almost nothing on any note and still maintain the pitch. Anyone who spends more time on the flute than the piccolo will lose some endurance on the piccolo, but it will sound more open and relaxed.

Piccolo Range

Many composers and conductors don't realize that a D5 is the lowest piccolo note, and this is written an octave lower as a D4. Some players can extend the low range to D \flat by partially covering the end of the piccolo with the right pinky, and this technique is used in David Loeb's *Six Preludes-Donglim*. Nagahara Flutes has designed a piccolo that goes down to C4; on this instrument the highest note is C#7.

Characteristics

Piccolos are made of silver, wood, a composite, or some combination of these materials. Metal

piccolos are more practical for marching and outdoor performances and usually have a cylindrical bore. It responds easily in the upper register but has a thin-sounding low register. Professionals favor the mellower sound of a wood piccolo because it blends well with other instruments. Many are made of grenadilla wood, but some manufacturers use king, cocus, or cocobolo wood, which have different densities that affect the sound. Some companies have experimented with composite materials in search of an inexpensive instrument that plays well and can be subjected to extreme weather conditions.

Padding for the keys has also improved in the last few decades; most piccolos are made with a combination of cork and skin or synthetic pads. Cork pads are more stable and work well in a variety of weather conditions but are also more absorbent, so piccolos with these pads will need to be swabbed often, especially in humid conditions. A disadvantage of cork is that it creates key noise, which may be heard on some recordings.

Piccolos cost between \$400-\$5,000, but the more expensive models often come with several different headjoint options and some makers will give buyers up to a year to select a headjoint.

Maintenance and Repairs

Both flutes and piccolos should be swabbed out after every playing session, and it is especially important to get water out of the inside edge of the headjoint. Cloth swabs should be in good condition and not have frayed edges because loose threads can be caught in the mechanism. Water-absorbent suede or silk are the best materials to use. General care and maintenance for silver piccolos is the same as for flutes.



All instruments should be cleaned, oiled, and adjusted at least once a year by a professional repairman, depending on usage. The bore and body of wood piccolos should be oiled with almond oil every few months to avoid cracks in dry wood. A loose headjoint can be tightened by applying cork grease on the tenon cork and adding a small piece of cigarette paper.

Ungummed cigarette paper can also be used for absorbing excess water and keeping pads clean. Cork pads can be cleaned on occasion with witch hazel, but alcohol will cause pads to dry out and crack, and powder will cause the mechanism to bind. Sticky pads should be replaced.

Other common malfunctions include popped springs and loose screws. A spring that simply has popped out of place can be put back with a tool that has a small hook at the end, but weak or broken springs should be replaced by a repairman. If keys are not closing properly a screw adjustment might be necessary. This is especially common when one key closes two or more holes. Pivot screws should be checked regularly and tightened if necessary. New instruments are especially susceptible to loose pivot screws.

Playing the Piccolo

The piccolo is more comfortable to hold for musicians with small hands than the flute. The piccolo embouchure is more focused, firmer, and placed higher on the lip than the flute, but sound production on piccolo takes less air and a faster air stream, especially when playing softly. Sometimes piccoloists have to expel air through the nose as an oboe player would while playing. This is more likely to happen on pieces with few rests.

Technical passages are easier on piccolo because the fingers are closer together. Difficult passages in the ear-piercing upper register can be learned on flute to protect hearing, but doing this is a poor substitute for playing on the piccolo. Form-fitted ear plugs are a good investment; they block less sound than store-bought silicon, rubber, or foam ear plugs, but block enough sound to prevent hearing loss. It is important to remember that ear plugs change the way an instrument sounds. To be sure sound quality does not suffer try wearing an ear plug only in the right ear.

Piccolo vibrato should be narrower and tighter than on flute and should be used more sparingly, especially in loud,

tutti sections. There should be enough vibrato for the sound to shimmer and add color to the full ensemble sound, but vibrato should not overwhelm the piccolo sound. Vibrato can be used more freely in solo passages but still should not be as wide as on flute.

Piccolo intonation is more treacherous because the instrument will be the first perceived to be out of tune, even if other instruments are at fault. In addition most piccolos tend to be sharp on C5, C#5, and D5 but flat on C6, C#6, and D6, especially when playing softly. Diligent practice with a tuner is highly recommended.

Piccolo players more often rely on alternate fingerings to make soft notes more responsive and in tune than flutists. Two good fingering listings are *Guide to Piccolo Fingerings* by Steve Tanzer (Sopranino Press) and "Special Piccolo Fingerings" by Jan Gippo (*Flute Talk*, July/August 1995). It will take experimentation to find the best special fingerings for each piccolo. A good tuning exercise is to play a note with the regular fingering and change to an alternative fingering while playing a diminuendo without going flat or sharp.

In bands and orchestras the piccolo is primarily a color instrument, like the



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English horn and E \flat clarinet, and should blend well enough so the sound is noticeable when all the other instruments play but is never dominant. Piccoloists often play solos and should have a good ear and a great deal of confidence; this is an instrument best covered by one of the strongest players in the flute section.

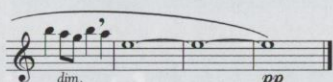
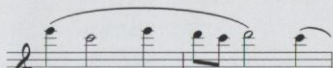
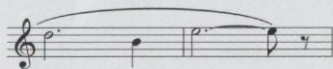
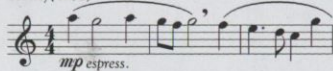
Piccolo parts often double E \flat clarinet parts, so the piccoloist should sit next to the E \flat clarinetist; both players should be in the second row with the piccolo behind the flute section. Otherwise the conductor will think the piccolo is too loud. A piccolo player in a band will eventually play a duet with almost every other section, even the tubas, and a seat in the second row helps the piccoloist hear the other players more easily.

Piccolo Solos

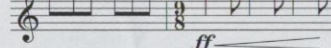
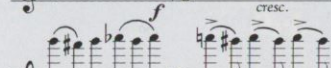
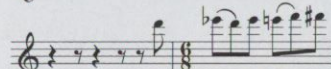
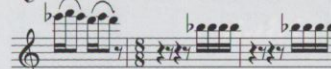
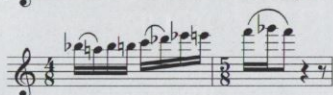
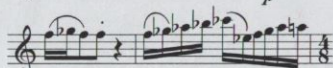
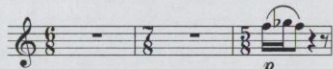
There are many difficult and beautiful solos in the band repertoire. One particularly treacherous solo is at the end of the second movement of Persichetti's *Divertimento for Band*. It appears simple but is extremely difficult to play in tune, especially the last 6 bars, which start with a *mp* E6 and end with an E5 held for twelve beats

with a diminuendo to nothing. The aim is to keep the pitch from sagging as the air supply dwindles.

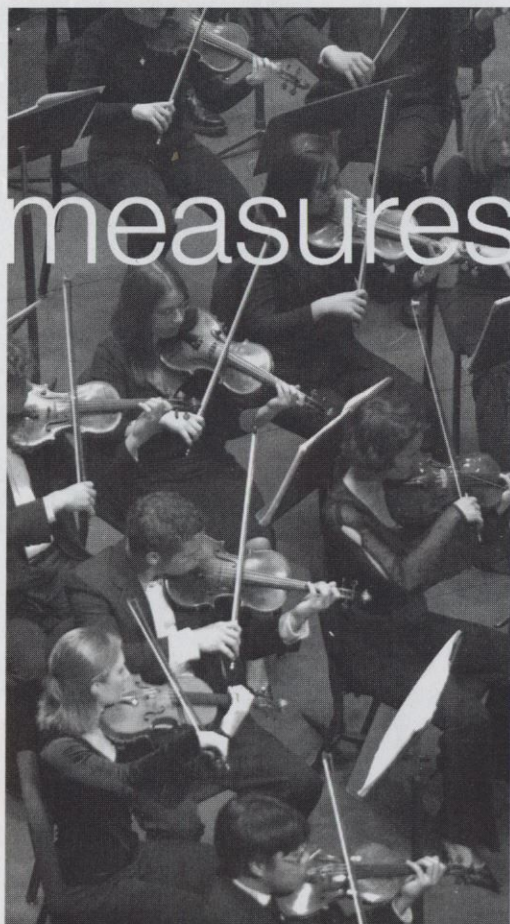
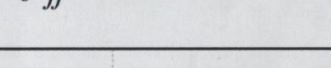
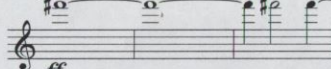
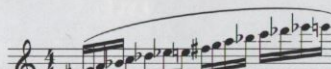
Slowly (♩ = 72)



Rhythmic accuracy is of utmost importance for this solo in Andreas Makris's *Aegean Festival Overture*. The tempo is fast and the solo alternates with the oboe in the first two bars.



In Ron Nelson's *Rocky Point Holiday* the piccolo and E \flat clarinet are doubled in a descant in the highest part of their ranges. Unless both players are strong it will be best for one of the two to take the passage down an octave to alleviate intonation problems.



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The piccolo solo in Edwin Franko Goldman's *Chimes of Liberty* is more difficult than the one in *Stars and Stripes Forever* and it ends on a Bb6; everyone else is at least two octaves lower.

It is best to practice the solo in *Festival Variations* by Claude Smith slowly at first because the unpredictable changes between tongued and slurred notes are tricky. This solo is doubled with the bassoon, which can be hard to hear; these two players should meet outside of band rehearsal to work out the intonation problems.

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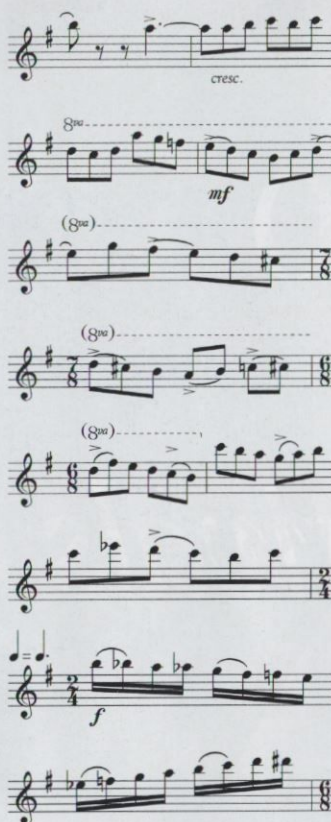
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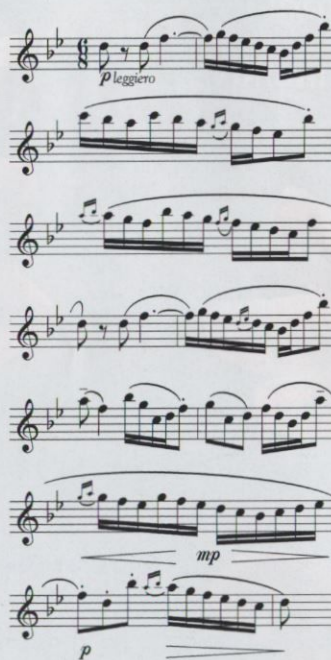
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Some of the most beautiful piccolo solos are in the first and third movements of Malcolm Arnold's *English Dances*. The solo starting at [B] in the first movement should sound as fluid as possible, and the staccato eighth notes should not be clipped.



The lyrical solo in Peter Mennin's *Canzona* at [J] is doubled with the oboe and should be played with a sense of forward motion while maintaining a lyrical quality. Intonation is also critical.



The solos in Percy Grainger's *Lincolnshire Posy*, the opening theme of Norman Dello Joio's *Variations on a Medieval Tune*, and Ippolitov-Ivanov's *Caucasian Sketches* show off the piccolo with fluid lines in a way not usually heard by the average listener. Any serious piccoloist should be able to play the solo in John Philip Sousa's *Stars and Stripes Forever* from memory in both A^b and G. In the *Limelight*, *Piccolo Solos and Technical Passages from the Symphony Band Repertoire* compiled by Nan Raphael is an excellent book for band directors to use for seating auditions as well as for students to use to learn the repertoire and prepare for military band auditions.

Flutists interested in learning more about piccolo playing should read the "Let's Talk Picc" column in *Flute Talk* magazine. There is also a flute listserv on which questions about piccolo playing can be posted. The address to sign on is listserv@listserv.syr.edu. □

Nan Raphael is currently active nationwide as a clinician and guest soloist and is a recording artist with the Washington Winds, whose recordings can be found through Walking Frog Records. She was solo piccoloist with the U.S. Army Field Band from 1979 to 2003 and was a featured soloist with the band on several major tours in the U.S. and abroad. Raphael has had several articles published in *Flute Talk* magazine, the Washington Flute Society Newsletter, and the *Band World* magazine and compiled a book of piccolo solos and technical passages from the symphonic band repertoire. She can be reached at SoloPikolo@aol.com.

