

The Orchestral Alto Flute (Article In Progress)

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History and Development

Generally agreed, the alto flute was invented by Theobald Boehm in and around 1855-56, after a visit to London, where he heard and studied the larger bore English flutes. The alto flute was the only larger flute (at this time) to play similar to the C Flute (in tune, strong tone, wide facility). Its accuracy and agility brought the instrument early attention. During the latter half of the 19th century, the instrument was finding a stage voice when used as an excellent accompaniment for singers. As the turn of the century came around, it was in English orchestral scores that the alto was often mis-represented as the Bass Flute, which was a language translation error that managed to stick over the decades. Of course with the progression of the 20th century we find other composers willing to explore and experiment with the instruments most distinct lower rich rounded sound. Composers such as Maxwell Davies, Pierre Boulez, Esa-Pekka Salonen and Thomas Ades, whom have composed various compositions involving and even featuring, the distinct voice of the alto .

Hearing and Blending

A good tip for Alto playing is to always remember and hear, all sounds a fourth lower, and that is just not on paper, but more as a sonic truth! (if you will). This takes time to appreciate and develop, yet, once a player hears that low G below the staff for what it is (ie: a tone not in the range of the C Flute), the glory of the instrument will begin to be revealed. To find the rich sound that will blend well yet project, use a wider, more open, and slower air stream, which will produce a better tone, greater facility and a more secure intonation. Take time to practice and listen carefully to your slow warm ups, and memorize the muscle set that works for your best tone. You may be surprised at how open your embouchure truly is. Note to self, now that you may be excited about producing a big orchestral sound, just because your flute is bigger, does not mean the Principal Flute players always wants to hear you.....if you know what I mean. Work on blending, that is the artistry and nuance of the Orchestral alto flute. You are there to support the harmonic colour and voicing. The alto voice is their extension, not the other way around. You will get smiles down the line.....promise!

Orchestral Repertoire

Resources:

- "The Alto Flute Practice Book" (Trevor Wye and Patricia Morris), Published by Novello
(Good source for Orchestral Excerpts, with NO Daphnis, due to publishing restrictions. Helpful Preface with tips for playing Alto, and all the major Britten Opera's involving Alto flute with useful Orchestral cues printed in the part).

- "Great Orchestral Duos" by J. Baxstresser
(A most helpful book for the serious Orchestral player. An extensive resource for the serious Orchestral player, with expert advice on all aspects of orchestral performance. A pull-out section by Crammer discussing the importance of the Alto flute in any Orchestral setting.

-Chris Potter-Alto and Bass Flute Site(<http://altoflute.net/html/books.html>)
Some helpful fingering tips in the resource book.

Peter Sheridan, has performed as an orchestral alto section player with the Hollywood Studio Orchestra, the Colorado Music Festival, Pasadena Symphony and the University of Arizona Wind Ensemble. He was a featured ensemble soloist on 'The Wind of Nugal' by Michael Colgrass and has commissioned fourteen compositions for the alto flute, including a recent piano reduction of the 'Alto Flute Concerto' by American composer David Ott.