Although the transverse flute dates as far back as 900 BC or earlier, it was not until the mid-1850’s that Theobald Boehm, a Munich flute player, inventor and jeweler/goldsmith, engineered a unique design that resulted in the most important evolution of the flute in its entire history, creating the basis for the modern concert flute that we know today.

Of all the woodwind instruments, the flute is unquestionably the oldest, with the horizontal (transverse) flute dating back to 900 BC or even earlier. As was explained in the February edition of Prelude, the first flute, made from bamboo, emerged in China, and was called a ch’ie. Early flutes were played in two different positions: vertically (like a recorder) and horizontally (as today’s flute is played.) The closest ancestor of today’s transverse flute first arrived in central Europe with traders from the Byzantine Empire during the Middle Ages. It became so popular in Germany (which included Flanders) that it became known as the German flute.

The most basic flute is a hollow tube without a reed. The sound is created as the air within the tube vibrates. Unlike other instruments, in which the musician blows directly into the instrument’s tube, the transverse flute is played by blowing across the hole of the mouthpiece, as you might blow across the hole of a bottle. Although history is scarce, there is enough information to suggest that the flute seemed to disappear with the fall of Rome around 400 AD and then reappeared in the 10th and 11th centuries.

The Greeks saw the flute as the instrument of the common man rather than an instrument of culture, so not much development was made in Greece in the construction or use of the flute. In western Europe during the 1100’s and 1200’s, the flute was mostly used in courtly music, and during the Renaissance, it became fashionable for amateur flute players to practice and play together in groups in private homes, in what became known as “consort music.” By the 15th century, images of flutes began to appear in many paintings throughout western Europe, indicating widespread use of the instrument. But, the essential construction of the flute remained unchanged for centuries. The most common flute was tuned to D major and notes of other keys could only be produced by half-covering the finger-holes, which meant that intonation was compromised, and at best, uncertain. The flute was at a distinct disadvantage as compared with the other woodwinds.

It was not until the 1700’s that instrument makers began making important changes in the construction of the flute. In Italy and the Netherlands, makers increased the diameter of the flute’s long tube, or the bore, which produced a more mellow sound. Bach and Handel began writing for the lower end of the flute’s range in addition to the upper range, which required a higher level of skillful playing. Flute virtuosi began to appear, performing concerts on what we now call the baroque flute.
The baroque flute, in use between 1650 and 1750, was the direct ancestor of the modern flute, and it remained problematic. Musicians encountered difficulties with certain pitches and playing in tune. They were unable to compete with the newly popular violin in playing the expressive music of the period. In the mid 1700’s, English instrument makers were among the first to improve the design by adding a system of keys to the finger holes, and the body was divided into two parts, which allowed the performer to shift the pitch to be in tune with different orchestras. By the end of the 18th century, the keyed flute had become the standard in modern flute design, with each country touting its own design. But there were still problems: the instrument was exceptionally difficult to play and the intervals between the notes were variable.

But in the early 19th century, everything changed. A German flutist/goldsmith/jeweler named Theobald Boehm, who had built instruments in his workshop, set to work on a new design that would improve the flute’s tone, as well as the player’s comfort. He devised a new mechanism that acted as an extender for the musician’s fingers, allowing the musician to play in greater comfort and in tune. Boehm released the new flute in 1832, and while it was instantly accepted by the most important musicians of the time, Boehm continued to improve his concept. In 1847, after studying acoustics, Boehm produced a re-design that boasted even larger tone holes and padded cups for each hole. His revolutionary new flute was introduced and demonstrated at the Paris Exhibition of 1847. Most crucially, the instrument was made of German silver, which Boehm believed to have the best acoustic qualities. The design won Boehm a number of prizes, including one at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1855.

The adoration was not universal. There were a number of performers and composers, notably Richard Wagner, and others in Germany, Italy and Russia, who were reluctant to accept the new fingering system. But, by the end of the 19th century, Boehm’s ideas had prevailed, and the modern concert flute was born. Except for some small changes, Boehm’s flute is still in use today.

Once the technically complete flute was established, the solo repertoire for the flute increased dramatically. Composers began to explore the limits of the instrument and experimented with different tone colors and means of articulation, which resulted in a whole new palette of sounds and playing techniques. In the 20th century, the repertoire for flute exploded with works that included compositions by Claude Debussy (Syrinx, 1912), Paul Hindemith (Acht Stuecke, 1927), Arthur Honegger (Danse de la chevre, 1926), Eugène Bozza (Agrestide, 1945) and Luciano Berio (Sequenza I, 1958.) Today, the list continues to expand, pushing the instrument – and musician – to new heights.

Please join us on March 11-13, 2022 for Mendelssohn’s Italian, a concert that will include selections from Mendelssohn’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the 21st century Flute Concerto by Kevin Puts and Mendelssohn’s Symphony No. 4, affectionally known as The Italian.
INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT THE FLUTE?

Would you like to meet our brilliant guest soloist, Demarre McGill? Watch as he discusses his journey as a musician and his performance of Jolivet’s *Suite en Concert* with four percussionists from the Utah Symphony:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uj7OyNtArWo

*Flute Unscripted* features a conversation with Demarre McGill, just prior to his performance of Puts’s Flute Concerto at Carnegie Hall, the same piece he will perform with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra on this weekend’s upcoming concert:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T90_OL25Kwk

You can enjoy beautiful music for flute and harp, featuring composers Debussy, Ravel and Fauré:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYeI3SYE1Wy&t=16s

Watch a rare 1978 master class and interview with flutist Jean-Pierre Rampel, in which he also performs sections of Debussy’s solo work for flute, *Syrinx*:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTzezHFYQzU&t=21s

Delight in seeing flutist James Galway, who has appeared with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, as he performs *Danny Boy* with piano accompaniment:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xv1rl1kFvwA&t=32s

WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC WILL SOUND?

Try HSO’S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you’ll hear on our concert stage – and more!

Use this link to hear Adam Walker, soloist, perform Kevin Puts’s Flute Concerto with the Peabody Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Marin Alsop:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9OMSMPaCbA

Delight in watching the Moscow City Orchestra play the overture from Mendelssohn’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=614ew5HY8vM

Watch Paavo Järvi conduct the Frankfurt Radio Orchestra in a performance of Mendelssohn’s *Italian Symphony*:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_HX_jF1_Tgc
Want the best recordings of the pieces you’ll experience on the concert program? **Coleman Casey**, HSO’s dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers his recording recommendations of selections featured in our upcoming Masterworks Concert.

Mendelssohn’s incidental music to *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* and his *Italian Symphony* are two of his greatest masterpieces. You can get both on one disc in absolutely first-rate performances from Claudio Abbado and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (SONY).

Kevin Puts’s lovely new *Flute Concerto* is well performed by Marin Alsop and the Peabody Conservatory Orchestra (NAXOS).
References

i  http://www.gemeinhardt.com/connect/gemeinhardt-education/flute-history.html
ii  https://www.theinstrumentplace.com/history-of-the-flute#:~:text=The%20flute%20is%20the%20oldest,was%20called%20the%20transverse%20position
iii  http://www.gemeinhardt.com/connect/gemeinhardt-education/flute-history.html
iv  https://www.tonara.com/blog/short-history-of-the-flute/
v  https://www.theinstrumentplace.com/history-of-the-flute#:~:text=The%20flute%20is%20the%20oldest,was%20called%20the%20transverse%20position
vi  Ibid
vii  https://www.vsl.co.at/en/Concert_flute/History
viii  https://www.tonara.com/blog/short-history-of-the-flute/
ix  Ibid
x  Ibid
xi  Ibid
xii  Ibid
xiii  http://www.gemeinhardt.com/connect/gemeinhardt-education/flute-history.html
xiv  https://www.tonara.com/blog/short-history-of-the-flute/
xvi  https://www.tonara.com/blog/short-history-of-the-flute/
xvii  Ibid
xviii  Ibid
xix  Ibid
xxi  https://hellomusictheory.com/learn/history-of-the-flute/
xxii  Ibid
xxiii  Ibid
xxiv  Ibid
xxv  https://www.vsl.co.at/en/Concert_flute/History
xxvi  https://www.vsl.co.at/en/Concert_flute/Repertoire