

## 'Ohe hano Ihu, the Hawaiian nose flute

By Leilehua Yuen

The **bamboo nose flute** is found on many island groups in the Pacific. In Hawai'i, it is considered a sweetheart's instrument. It is not a loud instrument, rather, the tone is intended to be soft and sweet. Traditionally, it is not played in concert for a large audience, but played in a quiet place for someone special.

A few generations back, a Hawaiian youth interested in courtship would fashion a simple flute. The romantic would take a length of bamboo and cut it, leaving a node on one end, and cutting the node off the other. He would take a burning hardwood twig and use it to burn a breath hole, and finger holes, in the flute. The spacing of the holes and the length of the flute would be determined by what the suitor believed to be an attractive tuning to be enjoyed by the object of his affections. He would then carefully sand the flute and burnish it with oil. Each flute, and its song, was as unique as the young romantic who crafted it.

Once finished, he would play the flute to attract the attention of the beloved. If she liked him, she would make a point of remembering the distinct sound of his melody. Then, when he wanted to attract her attention, he would softly play his flute to entice her to join him. Sometimes, a young woman would make a flute of her own to entice or reply. The flute was thus used to communicate messages between lovers.

According to one legend, a god taught a young chief to make the nose flute so that he could court a beautiful girl from the valley below his upland court. The nose flute is found in many Hawaiian legends of courtship and romance.

In the Hawaiian language, the flute is known by a number of names: *Hano*, "nose flute," (Pukui and Elbert 1986), by the more specific term *'ohe hano ihu*, "bamboo flute [for] nose," *`ohe hanu ihu*, "bamboo [for] nose breath".

When the ancestors of the present-day Hawaiian people arrived in these islands almost 2,000 years ago, they brought with them useful plants, including two varieties of bamboo, known as `ohe [OH-heh] in the Hawaiian language.

*Bambusa vulgaris* is a thick-walled lumber bamboo. *Schizostachyum glaucifolium* is a thin-walled bamboo used in Hawai`i for containers and musical instruments. As well as the nose flute, bamboo instruments traditional to Hawai`i are the *pū`ili* (split bamboo rattles), and the *ka`eke`eke* (bamboo xylophone).

Hawai`i's [Bishop Museum](#) has flutes from Hawai`i, the Caroline islands, Fiji, the Marquesas, Tonga, Niue, Futuna, and Tahiti. The Samoan people played their courting flute using the mouth. In Aotearoa the flutes were made of wood or human bone. In Hawai`i, it is used in the hula, the traditional dance, as well as in courting.

There are different ways to play the `ohe hano ihu. Two of the more common are to hold it similar to a cigarette, and to hold it similar to a cigar. In the "Cigarette Style," the flute is held between the index and middle finger, about three or four inches from the node. The thumb is placed gently against the nostril. The flute is angled so breath from the open nostril flows across the breath hole near the node. The other hand stops the tone holes. In the "Cigar Style," the flute is held between the middle or fourth finger and the thumb. The index finger is used to press the nose.

In either hold, while gently breathing out through the nose, adjust the angle of the flute so that the air passes across the top hole. Move the flute slowly into various positions until you can make a tone. Continue to adjust until the tone is clear and pleasant.

According to Arts and Crafts of Hawai`i by Te Rangi Hiroa, [old flutes in the Bishop Museum collection](#) have a hole at the node area for the breath, and two or three fingering holes. In the three-finger-hole specimen, one fingering hole is placed near the breath hole. Lengths range from around 10 inches to over 21 inches.



Though primarily a courting instrument played privately and for personal enjoyment, it also could be used in conjunction with chants, song, and hula (Emerson, 1965). Some kumu hula were said to have been able to make the flute sound as though it were chanting, or to chant and play at the same time.

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