

NAMING SIZES OF RECORDER

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A great deal of confusion arises in the naming of recorders by pitch ... There are several sources of this confusion resulting in a plethora of terms which are particularly confusing for the higher and lower members of the recorder family.

Size naming terms have been derived from their relationship to

- the alto recorder – e.g. third flute, fourth flute, fifth flute, sixth flute ...
- the bass recorder – e.g. bass, sub-bass, contrabass, double bass ...
- tessitura, specifically to the vocal parts played – e.g. soprano, alto, tenor, bass, descant, treble ...
- their fundamental – e.g. soprano in C, soprano in C₅ soprano in C₅, soprano in c'' and soprano in c² all refer to the same instrument

They also vary by

- language – e.g. garklein flötlein, flûte de voix, treble, basset
- orthography – e.g. gar klein Flötlein, garklein flötlein, garklein-flötlein, garkleinflötlein, Garkleinblockflöte Garklein-Blockflöte, garklein recorder, garklein, gark ...
- period – e.g. an alto recorder in G₄ was commonly used for the soprano line in music of the Renaissance

As if that wasn't enough, terms from these various sources are often combined, resulting in heterogenous sequences such as garklein Flötlein, sopranino, soprano, alto, tenor, bass, great bass, contrabass ...

Inevitably, a great deal has been written on this subject (see References), but we still lack a consistent system of unambiguous terms to apply to recorders in modern use. I note that this problem is by no means unique to the recorder and similar situations exist with respect to other families of woodwind instrument such as the flute, clarinet and saxophone.

It seems to me that we can resolve this by adopting a size naming system based on easily interpreted terms consistently applied by language, tessitura and fundamental pitch. Such a schema is presented in the following table in which the fundamental pitches are designated in American Standard Pitch Notation (ASPN).



Piccolino recorder, by Santi Occorso

PREFERRED NAME	FUNDAMENTAL PITCH (ASPN)	ABBREVIATION (case sensitive)	ALTERNATIVE NAMES
piccolino	F ₆	p	
piccolo	C ₆	P	<i>garklein Flötlein</i> ⁱ sopranissimo
sopranino	F ₅	s	
soprano	C ₅	S	descant
alto	F ₄	A	treble
tenor	C ₄	T	
bass	F ₃	B	bass in F ₃ basset
sub-bass	C ₃	b	bass in C ₃ great bass
contrabass	F ₂	C	bass in F ₂ double bass
sub-contrabass	C ₂	c	bass in C ₂ double great bass
octobass	F ₁	O	bass in F ₁ double contrabass
sub-octobass	C ₁	o	bass in C ₁ triple great bass

I welcome your constructive [comments and suggestions](#) on this schema.



Paetzold by Kunath sub-octobass recorder in C₁

References

- Lasocki, David R. G. 2000. *Not Just the Alto: Sizes of Recorder in the Baroque and Classical Periods*. Instant Harmony.
- Lasocki, David R.G., and Robert Ehrlich. 2023. *The Recorder*. Yale Musical Instrument Series. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Thalheimer, Peter. 2000. “In Quinten und Quarten: Zur Geschichte des Blockflötenstimmwerks [In Fifths and Fourths: The History of the Various Sizes of Recorder].” *Tibia* 25 (1): 16–24.

ⁱ In his *Syntagma Musicum* (1614-1620), Michael Praetorius used the expression *gar kleine[s] Plockfloetlein* to describe a one-handed pipe (*zuffolo*) with three front finger holes and one thumb hole. The smallest true recorder described by Praetorius, which he calls *exilent* (topmost) in Latin and *klein flöttlein* in German, was a soprano recorder in G₅.