

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 Flötleinⁱ</i>
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 triple bass
sub-octobass	C ₁	o	bass in C ₁ triple great bass
hyperbass	F ₀	H	hypothetical

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



Paetzold by Kunath sub-octobass recorder in C₁

References

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- Praetorius, Michael (1619). *Syntagma Musicum II: De Organographia*. Elias Holwein: Wolfenbüttel.
- Thalheimer, Peter. 1990. "Aspekte zur Geschichte der Blockflöte in c'" [Aspects of the History of the Recorder in c'']. *Tibia* 15 (3): 202–5.
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- Thalheimer, Peter. 2026. "Wege Zu Den Historischen Blockflötenstimmwerken [Paths to Historical Recorder Instruments]." *Windkanal*, 2026-1.

ⁱ A name that has been much misused. Georg Dockler, city comptroller, Leipzig (1577), noted "a case with three *gar kleinen Flöten*", said by Lasocki (2081: 39 & 2022: 212) to be "probably in c³" (= C₆). Michael

Praetorius (1619) coined 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 Flötlein* in German, was a sopranino recorder in G₅. Thalheimer (1990: 202-5) describes a true recorder in C₆ that came to light during the restoration of the woodwind collection in the Musei Civici, Modena. This ivory one-piece instrument was made by the Nuremberg maker with the mark M (probably from the Mazel family) and dates from c.1670. Thalheimer also describes a set of high recorder-like instruments made by Carl Kruspe of Erfurt around 1930, as well as true C₆ recorders made by Rainer Weber from 1947. Contemporary makers of the latter include Aulos, Hamman, Küng, Mollenhauer, Occorso, and Schwob. F₆ recorders have been made by Twaalfhoven and Occorso.