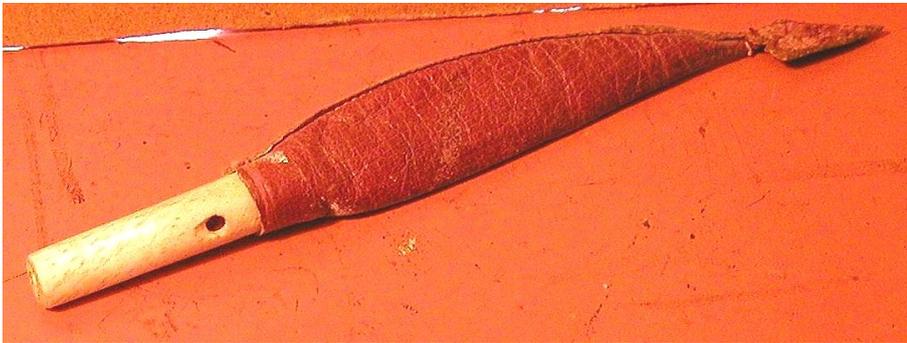


# Quail Whistles

## Jeremy Montagu

These are an interesting form of a hunting lure among such traditional folk instruments, for they are percussion whistles. The quail's call is so short that a tap with a finger is more effective than a puff from the lips, despite Beethoven's attempt to imitate it in the slow movement of his Pastoral Symphony, no. 6.



I have two of these whistles. One of them was given to me by Roma Escalas, then of the Barcelona Musical Instrument Museum while I was lecturing there; he said that it came from Eivissa (Ibiza). It is a short bone pipe set into a small morocco-leather bag which originally contained some material which would have allowed space for air between whatever fibres were used to fill the bag. A very similar instrument was noted by Ramon Violant i Simorra from the Pyrenees where it was called *botet* (in his 'La Caça', *Obra Oberta* 1, Alta Fulla, 1979). Unfortunately mine has lost all the content from the leather bag, and so it no longer works; because it has gone to powder, I suspect that it consisted of some vegetable fibre rather than Violant i Simorra's horsehair. When I first had it, a tap on the bag produced a very short, high-pitched cheep.

My other example I found, some ten years later, at a *brocante* at the Porte de Vannes in Paris in August 2000. This has a rather larger brown leather bag, very

similar to that in the Bonanni engraving (Filippo Bonanni, *Gabinetto Armonico*, 1723, plate XXIX, 'Quagliere', numbered 72 in the top right-hand corner), but mine has a small tin-plate whistle, looking like a miniature bosun's call. This one still works, and it suggests that they were widely enough used to be made commercially, whereas my first one was certainly hand-made.

The first examples of such an instrument that were called to the attention of the organological world were Afghan, published by Laurence Picken in the Festschrift for Ernst Emsheimer (*Studia instrumentorum musicae popularis* III, Musikhistoriska Museet, Stockholm, 1974). These are rather more complex, being made with a wind chamber like a wooden spoon, covered with a skin to form a miniature drum. Picken notes that villagers in Uttar Pradesh also use similar whistles.

The playing technique, clearly described by Picken and illustrated with sonograms as well as photographs, is to tap the skin lightly and thus produce a very short 'cheep', about 20 msec, shorter than can easily be done by the player's mouth. Picken (as those of us who knew him would expect) had experiments conducted, and these showed that the shortest possible mouth-blown 'cheeps' were more than twice as long, around 45 msec. Beethoven gives it to the oboe with a dotted semiquaver, a demi-semiquaver, and a quaver, at a metronome mark of dotted crotchet = 50. I do not have the necessary maths to convert these to milliseconds! Anyway, Beethoven's metronome marks are commonly ignored, so that duration in any performance would depend upon the conductor. But it is this very short duration of 20 msec that is why people go to the trouble of making such whistles, rather than using a much simpler mouth-blown one.

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