

CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

OCARINA

Heinrich Fiehn

Austria, Vienna, 19th cent.

Terracotta, H 9,5 x L 17,5 cm

MAHR1993998

The origin of instruments that use some kind of recorder (air blown through some kind of pipe with holes) to produce sound is very remote. The ocarina is an example of this kind of instruments, from the globular flutes family, sounding like a flute.

This ocarina, a piece from the Angra Museum Musical Instruments collection is made of terracotta, painted in black and has eleven holes. The golden markings in its base, despite being illegible, show that it was designed by Heinrich Fiehn, an Austrian sculptor whose ocarinas became very popular after being introduced in the 1879 World Exhibition at Sidney, Australia and thereafter marked with its logo.

Archaeological findings show evidence that ocarinas are more than 12.000 years old, being common among the Amerindian nations. Some ocarinas figuring birds and other animals, from 5000 B.C. were also found in India. Examples of other flutes with the same shape are the Chinese xun and the African spherical flutes.

In the course of the centuries, this instrument has changed in shape, dimension, range, design and popularity. It is believed that the ocarina like we know it in our days was invented in 1853 and is assigned to Giuseppe Donatti, a resident of Budrio town. This Italian citizen decided to improve the boat flutes, fully redesigning it in such a way that it would feature a whole diatonic scale, using the clay from his bricks factory. Since the final result resembled a goose body, he named it ocarina, the Italian for small goose.

The ocarinas became increasingly popular and were even used in I and II World Wars to boost up the troops spirit. In Portugal, the ocarina is known since 1816, when seven Portuguese musicians, notably Alves da Silva and Artur Dalhunty, debuted at Trindade Theatre in Lisbon, playing with terracotta ocarinas.

More recently, the ocarina was like re-discovered when Nintendo launched the game Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, where the character Link plays a blue ocarina known as Ocarina of Time.