

Native American Flute

For thousands of years, the haunting sounds of the American two-chambered flute have summoned lovers, spirits and peaceful solitude for the first people of north America.

To some people, such as the Hopi, the flute is an integral part of ritual and spirituality. To the people of the Great Plains, the flute was an instrument of courting, for young men to serenade a sweetheart. For other people, the flute is an instrument of healing, meditation, honoring and prayer.

Among the Plains Tribes, men carved a large flute made of two cedar halves glued together with glue from hooves, and lashed together with rawhide. These had five or six finger holes and two chambers, with a block, or "bird," to direct the air. These were used by young warriors as love medicines. Also, men played the flute in their lodges in the evening. Some tribes used the flute in spiritual practice.

Each flute is hand crafted, and no two flutes sound exactly alike. The placement of finger holes, as well as the length of the flute, was determined by the physical size of the person who made the flute. Therefore, among traditional flutes there were no set scales or keys as we know in modern instruments.

Today, more modern tools are used to carve and shape the wood, but each flute is still made one at a time, start to finish, and each one is a one-of-a-kind instrument. Each flute has its own identity, its own voice. You will come to know its personality in time.

This manual is designed for both first-time players and intermediate flute players. It has information about flute history, playing the flute, care of the flute, and troubleshooting.

However, this is just a starting place. Find Native American flute music on YouTube and listen to the haunting sounds of others playing the flute, and it will expand your own playing, and help you experiment with different forms of music, as well as develop playing techniques.

I tell newcomers to the world of the flute that, "It is impossible to play the flute and be mad." What I mean is that the sound and breath needed to play is from a totally relaxed body, and even if you are upset or tense, you will soon be transported to a place of peace and relaxation.

Let's get started.

History of the Native American Flute

The archaeological record as well as folklore sheds light on the question “*How did this wonderful instrument come to be?*” This is a brief history of the Native American flute, touching on some of the key developments and turning points.

Human musicality most likely evolved in an environment rich in animal sounds. The rhythms that naturally spring up when walking or working with tools probably spurred the first rhythmic songs between 1.5 and 7 million years ago. Although the voice was probably our first melodic instrument, we only developed the anatomy needed for speech and articulate singing about 60,000 years ago. Flutes followed soon after (on an evolutionary timescale).

The oldest flutes we have were made from wing bones of a Griffon Vulture, and a Whooper Swan, as well as one from mammoth tusk ivory. These flutes were found in present-day Germany and France and have been dated to 33,000–43,000 years ago. These first flutes were all rim-blown flutes that required the player to make an embouchure on the rim of one end of the flute in order to make a sound.



Another variation on the design of the flute sound mechanism is the side-blown, or transverse flute. It still requires an embouchure, but is easier to master for most players than the rim-blown embouchure. The oldest existing North American flute is a bone flute excavated in East Texas and dating before 4000 BC. It is a transverse flute.



Any flute that requires the player to make an embouchure, whether it is a rim-blown or side-blown (transverse), is going to be a challenge to learn to play. Enter the duct flute - an innovation that uses the instrument itself rather than the player's lips to create the right conditions for air to vibrate and create an air pressure wave that we hear as sound. The duct (also called a "flue") is a narrow channel that directs the stream of air across a sound hole to the splitting edge of the instrument. The air comes out of the flue, crosses the sound hole, hits the splitting edge, and sets up a vibration. This air vibration happens because of the specific shape of all the aspects of the flute, but in particular the shape of the flue, the sound hole, the splitting edge, and the flute's sound chamber.

It's interesting that, unlike rim-blown and transverse flutes, the earliest existing examples of duct flutes in the Americas pre-date any examples of duct flutes from Europe or Asia by thousands of years. Were duct flutes invented independently in the New World and the Old World? Is it possible that there was a reverse migration of flute technology from the New World back to the Old World?

The Native American flute is a variation of the duct flute concept that dramatically improves playability.

The oldest existing Native American flute is the Beltrami Native American flute, shown below. It was collected by the Italian explorer Giacomo Costantino Beltrami on a journey through present-day Minnesota in 1823:

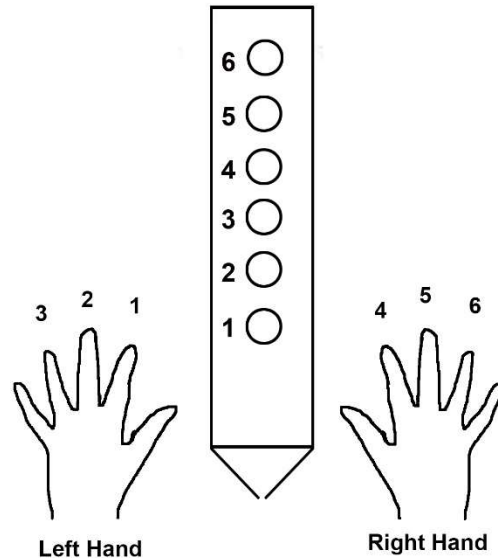


Shortly thereafter, we have the Hutter Winnebago Flute, shown below. It probably dates from 1825:



How to Begin

Think of your flute being represented by the diagram below. The mouthpiece of the flute, or the end into which you blow, is on the lower end of the diagram, and the numbers on the flute body correspond to the numbers on six fingers, three on each hand as numbered in the diagram.



Pick up your flute and place your hands on the flute body with finger #1 covering hole #1, finger #2 covering hole #2, and so on. Your fingers should be covering all six holes in the manner shown in photograph #1 on the following page.

Next, hold the flute NEAR your mouth and feel the way the holes feel beneath your fingers. **DO NOT BLOW INTO THE FLUTE YET.** Now, starting with hole #6, begin lifting your fingers off the flute body, as in Fig. #2 on the next page. Replace finger #6.

Now, lift finger #6 again, then lift finger #5, as in Fig. #3 on the next page. Now, cover hole #5, then hole #6 so you are back to starting position in Fig. #1. Repeat and now lift finger #4, as shown in Fig. #4 on the next page. Go back down the scale.

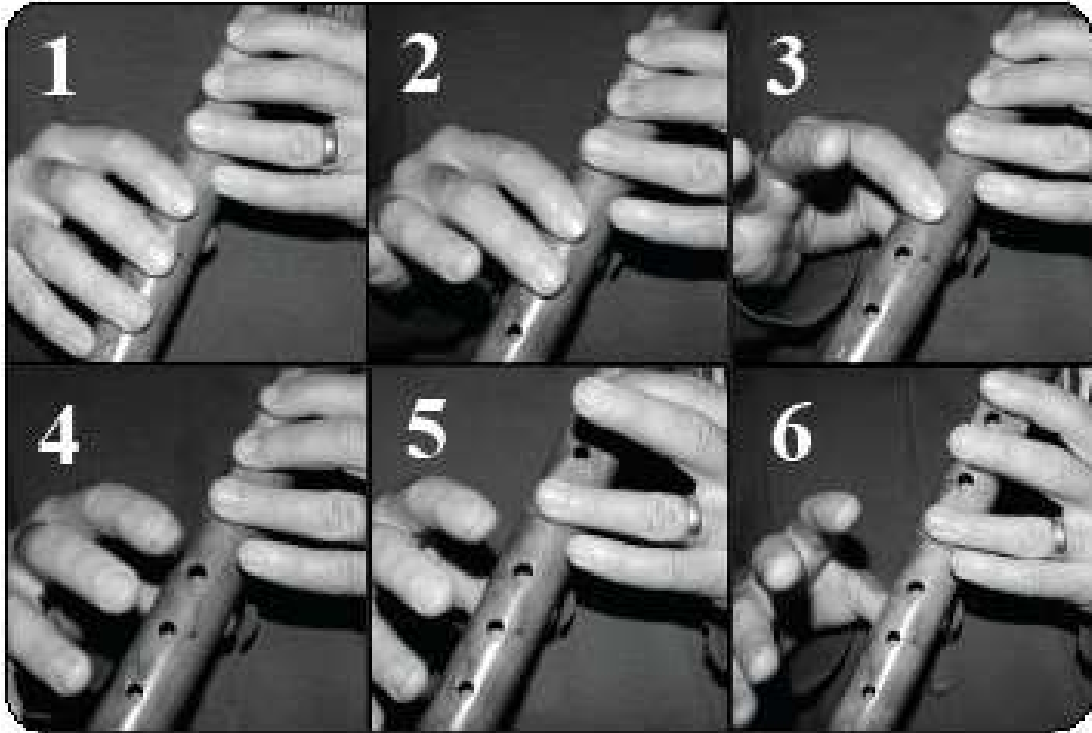
Next, leave finger #3 covering hole #3 and lift finger #2. See Fig. 5 on next page. Repeat the process of replacing fingers 2, 4, 5 & 6 until you are back at starting position.

Finally lift fingers 6, then 5, then 4, then 2, and now 1, so that you are in the position shown in Fig. 6 on the following page. You are balancing the flute body on your two thumbs and holding it in place with finger #3. You may find this easier if you are using your mouth to balance the flute as well.

These are the finger positions to play the PENTATONIC (five) scale on your flute, which is the basis of all beginner songs you can play.

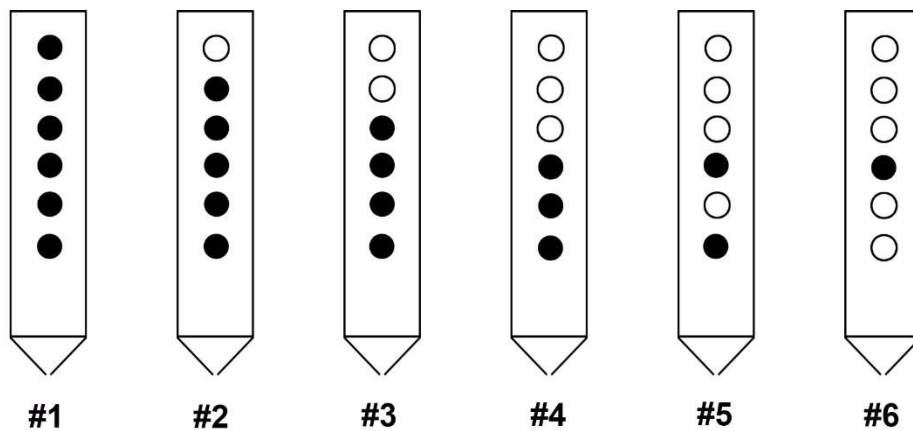
How to Play

To begin, hold the flute in both hands with your thumbs beneath the body of the flute and your fingers positioned over the holes as shown in position #1. If you refer to the diagram below the pictures, the first tablature shows the holes all covered as in Fig. 1.



This is the most difficult position, because ALL the holes must be COMPLETELY covered by your fingers. Use the soft pads of your finger and not your finger tips, so you can cover the holes more completely. RELAX. The more tense your fingers, the more difficult this will be. Do not proceed until you can cover all 6 holes.

Closed Hole ● Open Hole ○



The diagram above is called a “tablature,” or diagram of the finger positions. Position #1 in the photograph is shown in #1 in the tablature: all holes are closed, or covered.

Beginning to Play

- 1) **Begin by placing your fingers over the 6 holes as shown in the diagram. By relaxing your fingers, you will be able to cover the holes using the flat soft pads of the end joint of your fingers, rather than your fingertips. Cover all holes and blow SOFTLY, moving your fingers around until you get a clear sound, free of buzzing, cracking, or jumping to a higher octave. Do not give up...this can be one of the most challenging times in learning to play the flute.**
- 2) **Once you get a clear sound with all holes covered, make the next higher note on the scale by removing your finger from hole #6, the hole farthest from your mouthpiece. See Fig. #2. Now, replace finger #6, and repeat until you get clean, clear notes.**
- 3) **Next, while covering all holes lift finger #6, then lift finger #5, so that holes #5 and #6 are uncovered. See Fig. 3. This is the next note on the scale. Now, replace fingers #5 and then #6. Repeat until you are playing three clean, clear notes. Do not proceed until you can master these 3 notes.**
- 4) **Now, add finger #4 to the scale, so that you start by lifting finger #6, then #5, then #4, (See Fig. 4), and go back down the scale just as before. Practice, practice, practice.**
- 5) **Next, leave finger hole #3 covered (see Fig. 5) and skip over to hole #2 as you go up the scale. As before, lift #6, then #5, then #4, then #2. Go back down the scale.**
- 6) **Finally, lift finger #1 so that all holes are uncovered except #3. You will be using your thumbs to balance the flute with only one finger pressing down on the top, still covering hole #3. Now go back down the scale.**

DO NOT BE DISCOURAGED IF YOU ARE HAVING TROUBLE WITH NOTES “CRACKING” OR JUMPING TO A HIGHER OCTAVE. This is the most difficult first step in learning to play, and you will soon master it with practice.

If notes are not playing clearly, or not playing consistently with a clean, clear voice, it is not a problem with the flute. This is a normal progression in learning “finger memory” so that you can COMPLETELY cover the holes and produce a pleasant sound consistently.

Again, DO NOT BE DISCOURAGED.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

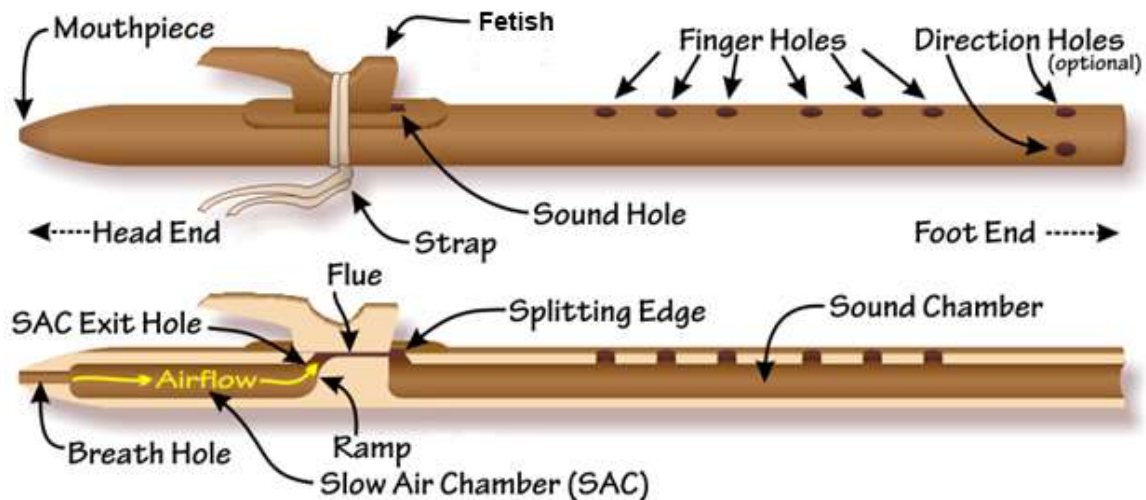
I cannot stress this enough!

Fetish Placement and Construction

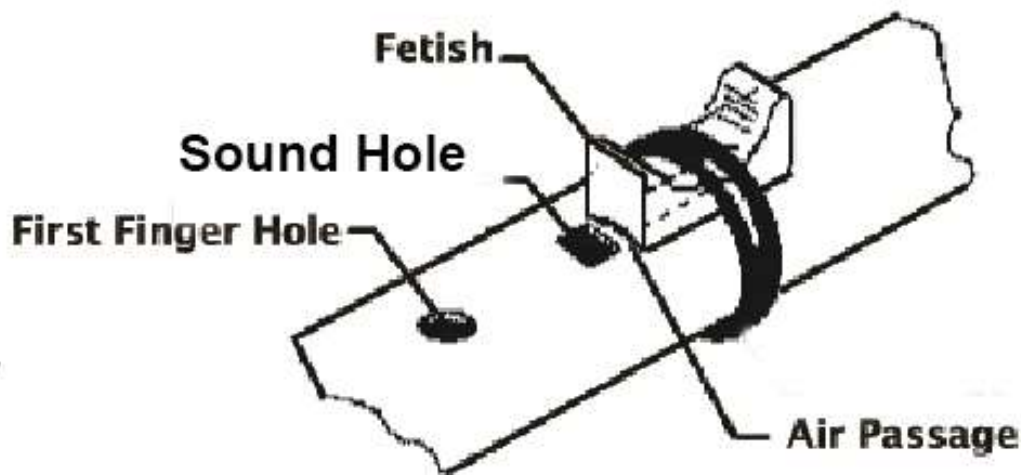
From time to time, you should check the alignment of the fetish, or “bird” as it is sometimes called, so that it gives the optimum sound.

There are two square holes beneath the fetish. Between them is a “flue,” and the air passes up through the rear hole, along the flue beneath the fetish, and across the front hole, or “sounding hole” in front of the fetish.

The diagram below will help you identify the parts of the flute:



If the fetish is not in proper alignment, you will not get the proper sound or tone, and you will think you have a problem with your instrument. This is easily corrected. See the diagram below for proper alignment of the fetish:



The front of the fetish block should align even with, or just slightly behind, the rear of the square sounding hole, and centered over the flue. The block must be tied down TIGHT so that NO AIR ESCAPES FROM BENEATH THE FETISH. Escaping air will cause loss of tone and a sound of escaping air.

Embouchure

The mouth position used to play an instrument is called an embouchure. When first playing a Native Flute, the natural tendency is to place the whole mouth end of the flute into one's mouth and blow. This technique has a few downfalls: it creates excess moisture in the flute, hinders breath and tonguing techniques, and reduces the ability to control the airflow.

When you begin to learn to make notes and play scales, you should not concern yourself with how to place your mouth on the end of the flute. Just find something that feels natural and comfortable and breathe slowly and easily into the mouthpiece.

After you begin to feel comfortable with the fingering, and the notes are being played clearly on a consistent basis, you should then concern yourself with "embouchure," or the way you conform your mouth shape and placement on the mouthpiece of the flute.

Close your lips then place the flute against them, much like you are kissing it. Another technique is to allow your upper lip to close about half of the air hole and place the lower lip just slightly underneath the air hole.

In this way the air passage from the mouth is reduced and backpressure is created. This technique provides a better sound, less moisture buildup, and more control of the flute.

Moisture Buildup in the Flute

When blowing into the flute, condensation from the breath will build up in the air chamber and, over time, will clog the air passage so that the air will not be able to flow easily. Until the tongue and mouth become used to the mouthpiece moisture buildup can be frequent.

The buildup normally occurs after playing for a while. One solution is to place a finger partially over the sound hole and blow hard into the flute. The moisture will come out from the front of the fetish as a drop or spray of water. Then hold the flute by the bottom end (opposite of mouthpiece) and shake the moisture out of the breath chamber. Another option is to take the fetish off, let it dry out, and then tie it back on. Creating an embouchure when playing the flute will also help in reducing the moisture buildup.

TROUBLESHOOTING

No sound Very weak sound	Fetish loose Fetish not properly aligned Fetish covering sound hole
Buzzing sound Weak volume	Moisture buildup beneath Fetish Fetish not properly aligned
High or low note jumps an octave Note squeeks	Blowing too hard Fetish aligned too far forward over sound hole
Notes not clean and clear Notes crack and change tone	Holes not properly covered. Move fingers so holes are completely covered by fleshy part of fingers and not tips.
Moisture coming from beneath Fetish Moisture dripping out of slow air chamber	Cover sound hole with finger and blow hard through mouthpiece. Remove fetish and allow to dry.
Fetish will not stay in proper alignment	Leather tie-down strap holding Fetish is loose. Loosen knot, re-wrap tightly around flute, and re-tie knot.

Care of Your Flute

The enemy of wood is water. Your flute is treated with non-toxic tung oil for water-resistance on both the interior and exterior.

DO NOT CLEAN YOUR FLUTE WITH ALCOHOL, WATER, OR ANY OTHER NON-OIL-BASED LIQUID.

To put shine on the exterior of your flute, you can use Clark's Cutting Board Wax, which is food-safe. Rub it on with your fingers and wait until it turns foggy, then buff it, just as you would car polish.

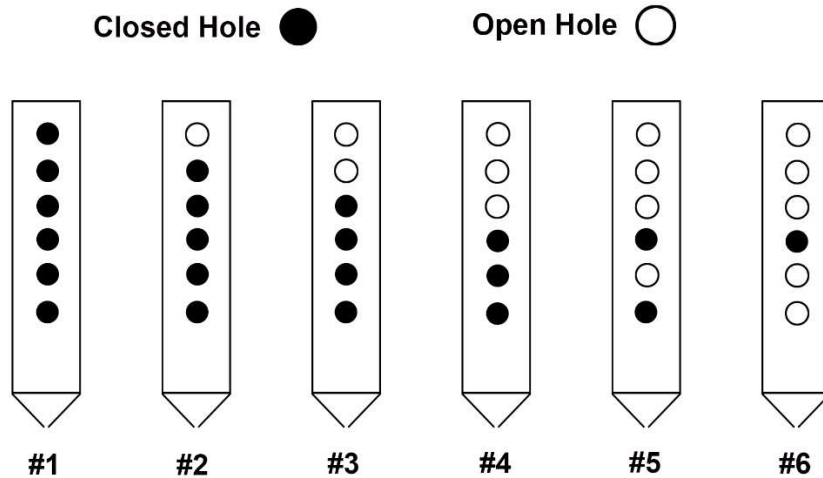
An alternative to use on both the exterior and interior is a food grade oil, such as Clark's Cutting Board Oil. Apply the oil to the interior and let it soak in. For the exterior, rub it in, then wipe it off after it has set for a few minutes.

Your flute is made of kiln-dried wood, and is assembled in a very dry environment (the high desert of West Texas). You may want to occasionally apply some food-grade oil to the interior and exterior to keep the wood moist, but **DO NOT USE DAMP CLOTHS OR ANY OTHER DAMPENED MATERIAL TO MOISTURIZE IT.**

KEEP AWAY FROM DIRECT SUNLIGHT IF YOU DISPLAY IT IN A ROOM.

SCALES

Your flute is based on a pentatonic scale, or a scale of five notes. Shown below are the notes of the minor pentatonic scale, shown for three different basic flutes, the Am, Gm and F#m. Your flute is one of these.



Key	Note	Note	Note	Note	Note	Note
Am	A	C	D	E	G	A
Gm	G	A#	C	D	F	G
F#m	F#	A	B	C#	E	F#

Songs

If you are a beginning flute player, you may want to download songs of professional Native American Flute artists so you can learn the ones you like. A few of the more popular artists are:

R. Carlos Nakai
 Coyote Oldman
 Douglas Spotted Eagle
 Paul Hacker

Their music is available from Amazon, iTunes, and other sources. It helps if you select music that is recorded in the same key as your flute(s).

As you become more familiar with your flute, you should begin to experiment with combinations of notes and phrases. The early native peoples probably mimicked sounds heard in nature, and by repeating them formed early “songs.”

There are some traditional songs, such as the Zuni Sunrise Song, and there are songs of many contemporary flute artists that usually fall into the genre of New Age Music.

Even for experienced flute players, it is a challenge to just sit and play according to mood, and not play old songs that you know. While playing old “favorites” is a relaxing and comfortable practice, it keeps you from expanding and discovering your own personal “style.”

I personally remember a time when I was taken to a private “hogan,” or Navajo home, in Canyon de Chelly by a Navajo guide. She took me to a canyon which was off-limits to tourists, where she lived as a child. As I walked to the back of the small canyon where her hogan was located, I sat on a rock and the most incredible song flowed through my flute completely involuntarily, as I blew and moved my fingers. I don’t look at this as a product of any “spiritual ghosts” but just an inspiration that came from letting my creativity run free as a result of the mood and environment.

The following page is a “tab” for a traditional Zuni song, the “Zuni Sunrise Song.” You can find several versions of this song played by different artists on YouTube. I suggest you listen to a couple of versions before you attempt to play the song.

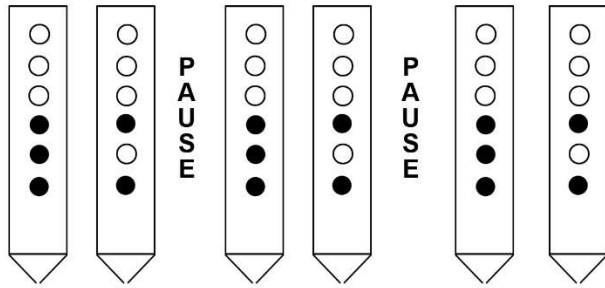
In the “tab,” the diagram is like the others you have already seen in this instruction book, with the top end of the flute diagram being the end farthest from your mouthpiece, and the bottom end of the diagram being the end with the mouthpiece.

The next page following Zuni Sunrise Song is a traditional Lakota Love Song. This is written in a musical format, so if you can read music, this is an easy form for you to play.

The page following Lakota Love Song is a blank “tab” page which you can print out and write down your own songs as you create them.

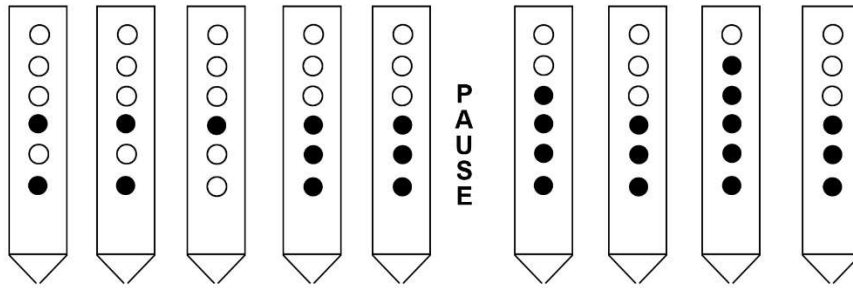
ZUNI SUNRISE SONG

1st. Stanza

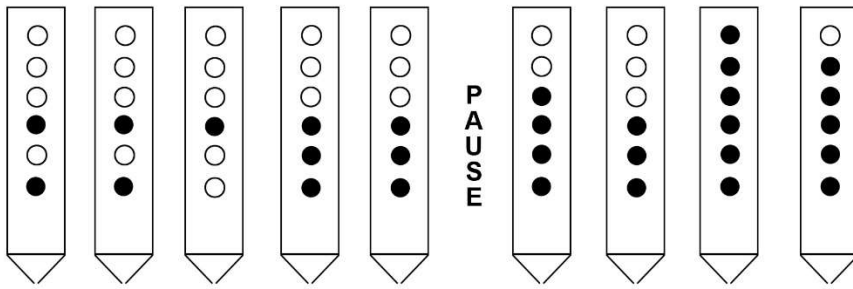


REPEAT 1ST. STANZA

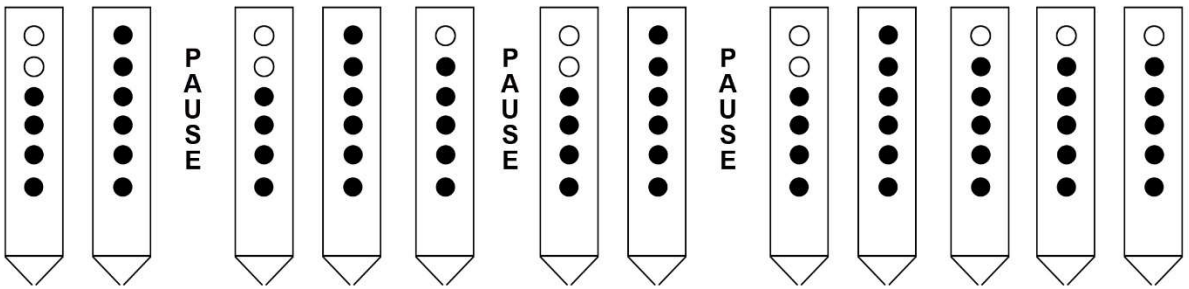
2nd. Stanza



3rd. Stanza



4th. Stanza



REPEAT 1ST. STANZA

Lakota Love Song

Native American Flute

Traditional Sioux

