

Seljefløyte – willow flute, or sallow flute

Alongside the mouth bow, simple flutes have likely been among the world's first instruments. The *seljefløyte* (*willow flute*) is one such primeval instrument. In its original form, it consists of a pipe made from the bark of a willow tree or a similar natural material. The pipe is made by pulling a long piece of bark off the branch in one long piece – around 25 to 80 cm, depending upon the thickness of the branch. The *seljefløyte* was associated with life at the mountain summer pastures, and would certainly have helped the herdsmen pass the long days.

The music which was played was collected from the vocal and tune traditions. The melodies often would have been adapted for the *seljefløyte* due to the instrument's unique and slightly limited scale and, over time, perhaps emerged as distinct *seljefløyte* tunes.

The *seljefløyte* scale is virtually the harmonic series with some deviations. When one blows into the mouthpiece with varying strength whilst the hole at the end of the bark pipe is open, one gets different natural tones. When the hole is covered with a finger, another series of tones results. These two series together create the *seljefløyte* scale. By opening and closing the hole, one gets different notes, whilst the selection of notes is also decided by the strength of blowing.



Silje Hegg with her willow (sallow) flute. It is easy to get many nice notes out of this instrument, but to accurately get what you want – that is an art.

Learn to make a willow flute

Many of us learnt to whittle a willow pipe when we were small. The willow pipe is quite short. It has just one note if there are no fingerholes made in the bark tube. If there are fingerholes, a higher note is produced for each hole that is opened. Many also make a 'glider' from a piece of wood, thereby getting a small sliding flute that allows the player to glide continuously between notes (the same principle as a bicycle pump).

But the long willow flute – because it is thick and long – produces the harmonic series in the bark pipe. When one blows lightly, low notes result, and the more strongly one blows, the higher the notes which are produced. It can feel magical when one walks in the woods, cuts a willow branch, makes some cuts here and there, pulls off the bark, adjusts the mouth piece, blows – and suddenly beautiful notes emerge.

We will take a closer look at how to make a willow flute from a willow branch.

It is not only willow that is suitable for this. Other bushes and trees that have long branches without shoots can also be used. But there are only a few weeks during springtime, after the sap has risen up in the tree, that it is possible to pull the bark away from the wood without it being ruined. Further into the summer, the branches have got so many shoots that it is impossible to pull the bark off in one piece.



CD 1 – 3 Silje Hegg, willow flute: *Kivlemøyane*, etter Eivind Groven (Telemark)



CD 1 – 4 Hans Fredrik Jacobsen, willow flute: *Isterviepipa*: pols etter Marius Nytrøen (Østerdalen)

Activity

You are in the forest and have just cut yourself a nice long branch, approximately 40cm long. It can be longer or shorter.



1. In the thin part, you trim the length of the flute by making a precise cut through the bark around the branch. Remove the surplus bark below the cut. Cut the wood off close to the incision in the bark.
2. In the thick end, you cut off the branch - through the bark and the wood - where you want the flute to end.



3. Roughly 6cm from the thick end, you make one more incision through the bark around the branch, right into the wood.



4. Around 3 or 4cm further on from that cut, you make a notch into the wood through the bark like this:



5. This notch is called a sound hole. Seen from above it looks like this:

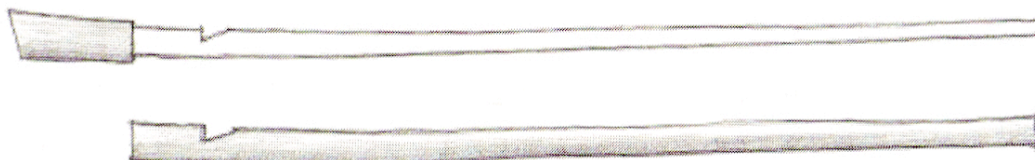


6. Now you can start to hammer carefully on the bark in order to make it come free from the wood. Use the hilt of the knife or a thick branch. Start at the thin end and hammer round and round for a few minutes. Then you can carefully try to twist the bark free from the wood and, if you are lucky, it will free itself with a little pop, but don't twist too far, as the bark will splinter. Continue the same procedure further up. Finally, you will have freed the bark from the wood all the way to the cut above the sound hole, and it will free itself with a little pop.
7. Now you are ready to pull off the bark. You mustn't splinter or puncture the tube, because then the flute won't work. Grip the thick part with one hand and almost at the end of the thin part with the other and then you pull very carefully. It is quite heavy in the beginning, but will quickly

become easier. Pull carefully so the bark won't get damaged.



8. Soon you will have two parts which look like this:



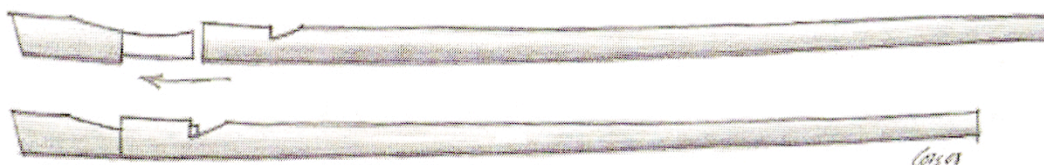
9. Then you cut off what will become the mouthpiece precisely where the notch starts and afterwards you cut the air channel formed as a hammock.



10. In addition to this, you cut one millimeter of the bark so that a bit more of the white wood is visible:



11. This is how the parts are put together:



12. Because you cut off a millimeter of the bark from the mouthpiece (point 10), there is one millimeter of the mouthpiece visible from the sound hole. This is often necessary for the sound to become clear and good.

In order to get many clear notes, you adjust the mouthpiece when you blow. Hold your left hand around the mouthpiece and take a careful grip around the bark above the sound hole. Watch out that you don't twist the bark so it breaks.

If there are punctures or cracks in the bark, there will be no sound. If there is a tiny crack or two, super glue can work wonders.

In the olden days, one would put genuine willow flutes in water so they would last longer. Today we can use the freezer. Wrap the flute tightly in

plastic and put it amongst the chicken and ice cream. Then it will maybe last for several years instead of one week.

In order to make the bark come free from the wood, there is a tradition to say a little magical rhyme. There are many variations, but here are a few:

Sveinung Bamble with an older *sjøfløyte* (sea flute). He learnt from his mother, who had learnt from Torbjørn Fykerud. In Telemark, the *sjøfløyte* was very much a girl's instrument in the 1800s.

CD 1 – 5 Per Midtstigen, *sjøfløyte* (sea flute): *Fanitullen*, etter Knut N. Juveli (Numedal)