



# The French-Cuban Charanga Flute

by Dr. Jessica Valiente

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## The 19<sup>th</sup> Century French Five-Key Flute

The French-Cuban charanga flute is an adaptation of a classical flute of French design that appeared in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is a simple-system wood flute with five keys (*D*#, *G*#, *F*, *B**b*, and long *C*) and a *D* foot. It was produced by French flute makers and widely used in France from sometime early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1860. After that time period, it and other simple-system French flutes were eventually supplanted by the modern Boehm-system flute among professional flutists and wealthy amateurs. However, the simple-system wood flute continued to be preferred by other amateurs and more humble working musicians because of its affordability. Beginning around 1845, as simple system flutes from France and other parts of Europe became cheaper and easier to produce, they began to be exported to other parts of the world. It became the preferred flute in Cuba and other parts of Latin America and Caribbean, again because of the flute's affordability. Ultimately, performers in those geographic areas made modifications to the instrument, in order to make it more suitable for performance under the usual acoustic conditions surrounding the Cuban dance music ensemble known as a *charanga*.

## European Flutes in the Americas

Before the Industrial Revolution of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, few artisan-quality musical instruments of the type used in classical music made their way to the Americas. In the case of flutes, they were made of fine, aged woods and other expensive materials, such as gold and silver, and all craftsmanship was accomplished by hand. The creation of these flutes was expensive and slow. Consequently, few flutes were exported and even fewer crossed the Atlantic. The Industrial Revolution changed this slow flute-creation process. Innovations such as steam power, hydraulic power, machine tooling, and changes in design and materials made flutes easier and cheaper to produce, while maintaining outstanding playing quality. Subsequently, the flutes were exported to markets on the other side of the Atlantic.

After 1845, flutes of various types came to the Americas from France, England, and Germany. These included everything from single-key folk flutes and multiple-key simple-system flutes to the newer Boehm system flutes. For much of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all of these flutes, particularly the German and French instruments, could be found in Cuba. It has never been established why the French-made, five-key, *D*-foot, simple-system flute became entrenched as the *de rigueur* flute for charanga, when other flutes of the same time period can also be used. However, some historical, organological, and economic factors present during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the standard charanga ensemble and the type of music they played evolved, can help us to understand logically how this flute type came to be the standard.

Economically, we can understand why Cuban performers owned simple-system flutes with fewer keys, rather than the Romantic flutes with many keys or Boehm-system flutes. Each additional key adds to the cost of the instrument, and in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the price of a Boehm-system flute could be as much as ten times the price of a simple-system flute with six keys or fewer. Then, as now, the earning power of most Cuban professional musicians, who were usually of African descent, was quite low, and they made do with inexpensive instruments. It is interesting to note that white Cubans generally considered employment in the entertainment industry to be beneath them. Furthermore, Cubans tended to hand their instruments down to the younger generation of musicians. The Cuban music industry was driven by large families or clans of professional musicians. Therefore, they had to keep the instruments in good repair, so that they would last for multiple generations. Assuming the wood did not crack, simple-system flutes with few keys were cheaper and easier to repair.

From an organological perspective, the French five-key flute offers multiple features that were useful in charanga's environment. The charanga ensemble evolved during a time before sound amplification, and there are generally two, and later three, percussionists in a charanga, along with a string section. For a delicate wooden flute to be heard above such an ensemble, the flutists restricted themselves to the second and the third octaves of the instrument. As the music evolved and grew in popularity, meaning playing for larger crowds, flutists found that the higher they could play the flute, the more they could be heard.

The French flutes have two advantages over German- and English-made flutes of the same time period. First, the French continued to manufacture some flutes with a *D* foot, even after they finally embraced the *C* or *B* foot, because they continued to find markets for them among customers with less income. This is helpful for charanga, because it will always be easier to play higher on a shorter instrument. Second,

unlike English flute makers, and to a lesser extent German flute makers, the French flutes have small tone holes and a narrower bore, resulting in a sweeter, more beautiful third octave. This made these instruments attractive to flutists in the evolving charangas.

One flutist, supposedly Francisco Delabart, discovered that if he pushed the headjoint cork inward until it was just one-quarter inch from the upper edge of the embouchure hole, with the help of some experimentation with fingerings he could extend the upper range of the French flute by at least a perfect fifth. In other words, he could extend the flute at least a major third into the fourth octave. Delabart must have owned a five-key flute, because the fingerings that he handed down to subsequent generations make use of all five keys. Theoretically, it is possible to play the five-key and any simple system flute from  $D_1$  to  $A_3$  without touching any of the keys, but never mention a sixth key, meaning the long, or left-hand  $F$ . Without all five keys, the flutist would not be able to execute all of the fingerings lying between  $A_3$  and  $E_4$ . Some notes would be impossible without the use of the five keys. Therefore, a five-key flute was the least expensive flute that one could purchase and still be able to play the high notes, which were quickly becoming mandatory in charanga performance.

Finally, after making such revolutionary innovations in the way the flute was played, it seems natural that all other flutists around Delabart would want to play like him. If Delabart had a French flute with five keys and a  $D$  foot, having the same type of flute would be the first step for an admirer to emulate him as a role model. Eventually, flutists began giving up other flute types in favor of the French five-key version of the instrument. We know this because researcher Antonio Kohiba Rivera demonstrated that some early 20<sup>th</sup> century flutists owned flutes that had some French parts that had been completed or repaired with parts from other flutes that were not necessarily French. In addition, Rivera found evidence of flutes that had had their sixth key removed and the hole plugged, along with other modifications that show a gradual shift in preference for the French five-key flute.

### **The Charanga Francesa and the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Charanga**

In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the first *charangas franceses* began to appear in Cuba. Perhaps they were smaller versions of private ballroom orchestras, primarily woodwinds, strings, and timpani, that existed in the homes of wealthy landowners of French descent who lived on the eastern side of the island. Perhaps they were an expansion of a smaller ensemble, also common on the eastern side of the island, known as a *cuarteto haitiano* and later a *quinteto haitiano*. The term “haitiano” is used because the Franco-Cuban culture of eastern Cuba evolved after French landowners fled Haiti and migrated there during the Haitian Revolution. These small ensembles consisted of flute, violin, bass fiddle, piano, and, later, light percussion, usually a *güiro*. The *charanga francesa* was a dance music ensemble that included flute (type not necessarily known or specified), violins, string bass, *timbales* (a local, smaller cousin of the timpani), and *güiro*, a scraped gourd instrument. At their inception in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *charanga francesa* performed *danzones*, the most popular dance music style in Cuba at the time. But, as Cuban musical styles and fashions changed, the charanga ensemble grew, adding piano, vocals, and, ultimately, more percussion.

During this time when the instrumentation of the *charanga francesa* was evolving and becoming more standardized, the flute’s role within the ensemble also changed. The flute’s prominence increased, from playing melodies to playing highly-embellished melodies, to inventing extemporaneous improvisation. These changes were the catalyst for the small modifications that make the distinction between a flute that is used for French Romantic music or a flute used for Cuban dance music.

### **From French Flute to Cuban Flute**

As mentioned earlier, the French-made flutes were favored for their sweet, high range that was easier to produce than it was on their English and German counterparts. Additionally, Cuban flutists began to move the headjoint cork much closer to the embouchure hole, in order to increase that range even further, compensating for the impact on intonation by pulling the tuning slide out quite far. These flutes have both a tuning slide and a barrel. However, changing the head cork position so drastically renders the lowest octave-and-a-half of the flute completely unusable. A flute modified in such a way cannot be used to play other types of music. Fortunately, it is easy to reverse this modification.

There is a great deal of myth and lore surrounding an additional modification that was often made to these flutes, one which is, unfortunately, much more difficult to reverse. This is the enlarging of the embouchure hole. If a charanga flutist is asked why the embouchure hole has been enlarged, they will nearly always answer that it was done to achieve the high notes. Of course, this is not supported by acoustical physics.

Occasionally, some flutists will say that the embouchure hole modification increases the volume. After all, the higher range of the modified instruments certainly helps them to be heard above the rest of the ensemble, but it does not actually make them louder. When the conga drum was first added to a charanga by Antonio Arcaño y sus Maravillas in the late 1930s, volume became an important goal. Although sound amplification had become available a little earlier (1931), it is likely that musicians and bands in Cuba did not have access to such costly modern equipment.

Some Cuban flutists began to modify their instruments in other ways. Some flutists began to enlarge the embouchure hole, hoping it would make the flute play both higher and louder. Traditional flute-making craft wisdom states that undercutting the embouchure hole is the way to achieve more volume. However, perhaps Cuban flutists, far from European cities that were home to generations of highly-trained flute luthiers, did not have access to this knowledge and, instead, experimented with the simple notion that something that is bigger must also be louder. Researcher Antonio Kohiba Rivera has demonstrated, on more than 350 extant French five-key flutes from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, that changing

the position of the headjoint cork is the only modification necessary to get a French-made five-key flute to reach an  $E_4$  and often much higher. And, while one can also undercut the embouchure hole for more volume, amplification has been the only effective solution for making the flute heard since the percussion section of the charanga increased to include the congas.

Nevertheless, this will explain why anyone shopping for a flute suitable for charanga will encounter many instruments with very large embouchure holes. These modified flutes can even be an impediment to mastering the fourth octave range. Fortunately, there are some luthiers who will craft a replica of the original headjoint, or who will restore the embouchure hole to its original dimensions. Both options are costly solutions.

### **Performance Practice**

The charanga itself is a rich musical genre. Charangas play the full range of Cuban popular dance styles that have come and gone ever since the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, many of the most well-known Cuban dance crazes had their genesis in the charanga. The mambo, the chachacha, and the pachanga were all originated by charangas before they were picked up by larger, brass-oriented ensemble types. Charangas also adapted dance styles that were associated with other types of ensembles, including the bolero, the son, and the modern salsa. Whatever the rhythmic genre that a charanga may be playing at any given time, the performance practice hierarchy will be the same: the rhythmic-harmonic foundation will be performed by the rhythm section of percussion, bass, and piano, augmented by the melodic/rhythmic support provided by the string section, all supporting the flute lead as it plays the melody and the most prominently featured extemporaneous improvised solo.

The flute plays two roles in a charanga. The first is to play the principal melody. This was especially true of early charangas from between 1900 and 1920, when charangas were instrumental ensembles before vocalists were later incorporated into the genre. The second role is to be the featured improvising instrument. In other words, every selection or number performed by a charanga includes a lengthy, featured improvised solo by the flutist. The improvisation tradition of charanga flute playing has a distinctive, cohesive, and recognizable style. The style is derived from three primary sources. Most performers use a combination of these sources, the balance varying according to the performers' personal taste and skill.

The first source is the classical music that is typical of most charanga flutists' training. Scales, arpeggios, and demonstrations of virtuosic articulation that are reminiscent of Mozart concerti and other late 18<sup>th</sup> century repertoire can be found in the improvised solos of many charanga flutists. The most well-known progenitors of this style are Antonio Arcaño and Richard Egües.

The second source is the vocal material found in the charanga repertoire. Many flutists will include both composed material, meaning melodies and refrains, and improvisational material (vocal improves known as *soneros*) in their own improvisation. The most well-known proponents of this style are Belisario Lopez and Rolando Lozano. Finally, the rhythmic vocabulary of the charanga, both the foundational rhythms and the percussionists' improvisational vocabulary, are fodder for imitation by charanga flutists. The master of this style is Johnny Pacheco.

For examples of charanga flute improvisation, curious listeners should seek out recordings by flutists Richard Egües, Jose Fajardo, Rolando Lozano, Belisario Lopez, Johnny Pacheco, and Eddy Zervigon; and by charangas Orquesta Aragon (Lozano, Egües), Orquesta Broadway, and Charlie Palmieri y Su Duboney.

[www.jessicavaliente.com](http://www.jessicavaliente.com)



**René Lorente**

### **Charanga Videos**

Wood Five-Key Flute: René Lorente

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=3u\\_LIhfYSQU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3u_LIhfYSQU)

Silver Flute in the Style: René Lorente

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rFcT-wBo8M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rFcT-wBo8M)

Ensemble: René Lorente

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvRnrZojIfE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvRnrZojIfE)