

# RICK WILSON AND THE “OLD FLUTES” WEBSITE

*Interview by Katherine Saenger*

**R**ichard M. Wilson, the man behind the “Old Flutes” website [www.oldflutes.com], is known to the flute world as a scholar, collector, and performer. However, most of his weekdays are spent working at his day job at the California Institute of Technology, where he is a professor of mathematics with research interests in the field of combinatorics. Rick earned degrees in math from Indiana University (AB, 1966) and Ohio State University (PhD, 1969). He regularly performs with various period instrument groups in the Pasadena area, and enjoys showcasing his collection of historical (c.1750–c.1930) flutes in lecture demonstrations around the country. He agreed to this email interview because, in his words, “I love to talk about flutes and flute-related things...”

**KATHERINE SAENGER:** How you balance your “double life”?

**RICK WILSON:** A professor at Caltech can have a very flexible schedule, so mostly there is no problem...though at times I become so engrossed in one life or the other that it becomes easy to neglect everything else. By the way, I am a much better mathematician than I am a musician.

**KS:** Do your department colleagues know about the flute side of your life?

**RW:** Most of my colleagues are aware, but only some of the students. I used to play on the Talent Show evening at “Freshman Camp” (our three-day freshman orientation session)—though perhaps my presence was more appreciated than my performance, since it was so hard to get any of the faculty at camp to participate! And once I did a Sunday afternoon concert at Caltech, part of three-concert series with a group called Con Gioia, which in this instance consisted of a fortepiano, a glass harmonica, and a glass flute (made by C. Laurent in Paris, 1834, and played by me).

**KS:** Tell me about your beginnings as a flute player. Did you start off with a metal flute in elementary school?

**RW:** I played an old, smelly school clarinet in junior high school band (though I never learned to practice seriously), and quit so I could take other courses in high school. Any interest in music lay dormant until my brother-in-law Robert Block, a musician/musicologist, sent me a recorder when I was 27. It was the right time; something clicked. I had few

interests outside of mathematics then. The recorder allowed me to play music with others. It was my first serious instrument. Two good friends, Doug Leonard and Suzanne Ferguson, coached me on basic music and recorder technique, introduced me to historical performance practices, and encouraged me to study period sources like the treatises of J.-M. Hotteterre (1707) and J. J. Quantz (1752). The recorder got me interested in renaissance and baroque music, and the instruments of those periods. Soon Doug took up the baroque flute, and in 1978, I ordered a modern copy of a baroque flute for myself. I realized that the flute would let me go deeper and further into the 18th century than the recorder would.

**KS:** What got you started as a collector?

**RW:** On a six-week mathematical visit to Holland in 1977, I bought two 19th century English boxwood flutes from an antique shop in Amsterdam. These were my first flutes, acquired before I ordered a baroque flute. One was a small flute with one key and the other

a four-key flute. They were made c.1830, though I had been led to believe that they were older when I bought them.

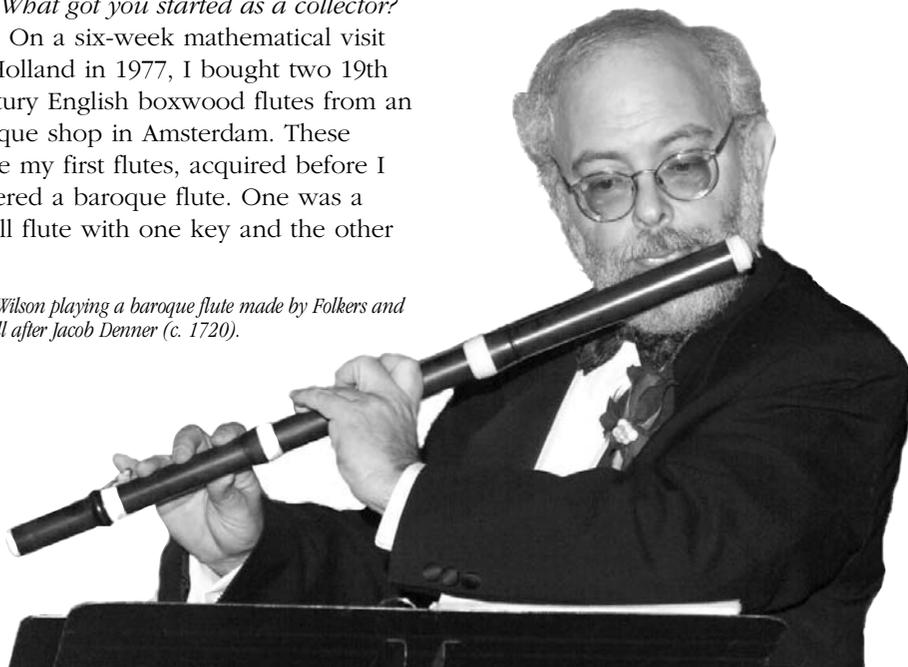
I was fortunate, when on a sabbatical leave visiting the University of London in 1978–79, to be able to take baroque flute lessons with Stephen Preston. Stephen was one of the pioneers on baroque flute. But he was also seriously interested in and very knowledgeable about 19th century flutes. He was a huge influence on me, both then and also later, at the Wildacres Retreat in North Carolina. Nancy Toff’s *The Development of the Modern Flute* also helped to pique my interest in early flutes.

When in London, I purchased a few more 19th century flutes, mostly just because I wanted instruments to play. Until 1985 I still considered myself primarily a recorder player, but I had caught the flute bug and the recorders were being played less and less. It was about that time that I realized I was a collector (with 15 antique instruments and a desire for more) as well as a player.

**KS:** Any interesting stories about the acquisition process?

**RW:** First I should confess that I have never found a rare, valuable instrument in a flea market. My flutes come from dealers in antique instruments, or from sellers referred to me by friends and professional contacts; occasionally by

*Rick Wilson playing a baroque flute made by Folkers and Powell after Jacob Denner (c. 1720).*



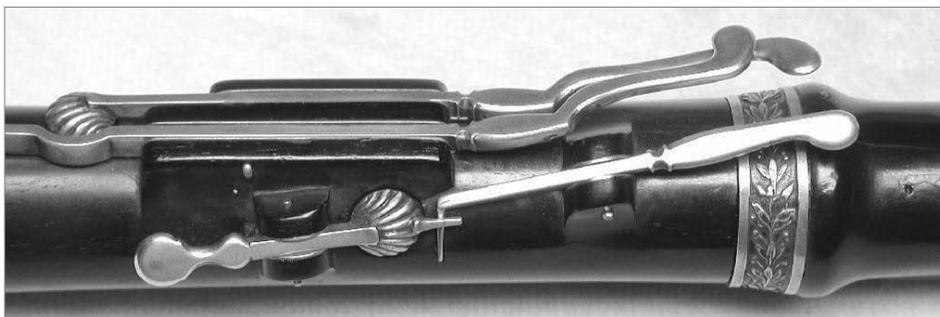
trades with, or purchases from, other collectors; and finally by auctions, including eBay. I did once buy 20 flutes at one time, part of a collection that was being dispersed.

I also acquired ten flutes through marriage. I played many duets with a good friend and fine flutist, Fred Kasper, who had some wonderful historical flutes, primarily modern replicas by Rod Cameron and Folkers & Powell. My relationship with his wife Kathy, a poet and artist, changed soon after his tragic death from cancer, and we have been married more than five years now.

Perhaps the most interesting story concerns the time I returned from two weeks in China in 1996, without any Internet access during that period. At the time I still did not have a home computer but would use the computer in my office, two blocks away, almost every evening. After a nap and some unpacking, I dragged my jet-lagged self over to my office and, after taking care of some email, casually logged onto eBay to look at the antique flute offerings. There WAS one very interesting item: a 19th century simple system flute with a long foot joint down to A, 14 scallop-shell keys, and engraved silver rings. The bidding was up to \$1800 and the end of the auction was in TWO MINUTES. The description said there was a maker's name stamped on the flute but that it was illegible. However, I instantly recognized the instrument as matching a flute made circa 1825 by Stephan Koch of Vienna shown in Philip Young's book *The Look of Music*. I decided to bid, managed to click just 15 seconds before the deadline, and won at \$1825. It is now one of my favorite flutes, and, in view of its date and location of manufacture, the perfect instrument for the Schubert Variations [composed in 1824].

*KS: Do you have any advice for would-be collectors?*

RW: Once when I was giving a lecture demonstration, a young flutist in the audience asked how one could get a collection like mine, and I said something like "Start 25 years ago." That's a not insignificant point about collecting, unless one can afford to buy an existing collection on the rare occasions when one might be available.



*Details of keywork for the left thumb and right-hand finger on the Stephan Koch (Vienna, 1825) flute Rick Wilson purchased on eBay after his 1996 China trip.*

*KS: Do you own and/or play any "modern" metal flutes?*

RW: I have only two metal Boehm flutes, a silver A. G. Badger (NY, c.1880) and a plated Bonneville (Paris, c.1912). These are important for my collection. Though my primary interests lie elsewhere, I must, of course, represent and understand the various types of Boehm instruments, if I am to speak about the history of flutes. I play them, though I don't sightread well, as my practice time goes elsewhere. I do have seven more Boehm flutes, but they are *wooden* instruments from the 19th century: two cylindrical German-style flutes with open G# keys, and five conical ring-keyed flutes including a Godfroy and a Louis Lot.

By the way, Badger is a VERY important 19th century American maker of Boehm flutes. He would be well known and admired today if only his flutes were at or near modern pitch so that they could be useful to modern players. But they are very high. Mine is at A=455 or somewhat higher. I love the Badger; it has a wonderful sound and I often wish I could find other players of flutes at that pitch to play with. But speaking of "modern," you may be surprised to know that I have a metal Murray system flute, by Armstrong, 1972. That's the latest instrument in my collection, which except for modern copies, does not otherwise contain flutes made after 1930. I haven't played the Murray much, but find it fascinating.

*KS: So the "standard" modern flutes don't really interest you?*

RW: I have a great deal of respect for the modern flute. I find it quite flexible and I enjoy contemporary music that includes extended techniques on these

instruments. Even though I prefer to play other systems, I greatly admire Boehm: he was the only one who had the courage to completely throw out the old system and the engineering genius to start over with a new, logical system and build a practical and elegant instrument with it.

I once said to my friend Jan Boland, a performer on both modern and early flutes, that I was thinking about spending more time on the Boehm flute. I wanted to play the Poulenc sonata. I was surprised at her reaction, which was (I paraphrase) "NO, don't do it! You are NEEDED for the old flutes. Plenty of people play the modern flute." Hah, hah. I know I could play Poulenc if I wanted to, but she had a very good point. I have an appreciation of and some affinity for the old simple system flutes and am fortunate to have some good instruments; I have a duty (and desire) to let them be heard.

Someone has to do it. The baroque flute is now represented by many fine players. Renaissance flutes are heard too rarely. But even more rarely heard, for instance, are early romantic period Viennese flutes (with nine to fourteen keys) playing flute music from 1820–1850.

*KS: How do you keep in shape on the flute?*

RW: I try to practice daily on four or five flutes, though sometimes a day or two goes by when I don't play at all. I am proud of my flexibility. I am able to switch from one flute to others with different embouchures, bores, and fingering systems without intermediate warming up. Not perfectly, but pretty well.

*(Continued on page 8)*

*Wilson (cont'd from page 7)*

I like to make an analogy between different flute systems and different languages. Once a language is learned well, there is little confusion, in the sense that a bilingual speaker of both French and English will be able to switch from, say, French to English without accidentally using French words in their English. Also, once one knows 10 European languages, it is easier to learn an 11th. Same for fingering systems.

And a slight digression: I think learning a different system flute is useful for all flutists. Just as it is said that studying a foreign language can help one understand one's own language better, so can studying, say, baroque flute, help you understand the Boehm flute. An instrument suggests interpretations, some of which can then be applied to performances on other instruments.

The flutes I use change with time. For weeks or months I will include a certain flute in my playing, but then I'll put it on a shelf and take another one down for a period. (I admit that sometimes I drag out a dozen flutes to try certain things.)

*KS: Any special preparations for concerts?*

RW: For a week or two before a concert or recital, it is essential to practice pieces on (and only on) the flute on which they will be played.

*KS: Do you get much chance to play with others for fun?*

RW: Oh yes. My friend Harry Bower in San Francisco is a serious player of renaissance flutes, one-key flutes, AND both early and late 19th century multi-keyed simple system flutes. We get together for week-long visits at least twice a year and run through many

duets on various keyed flutes. We invite local players of renaissance and baroque flutes for jam sessions. I do play with other instrumentalists, early or modern, when I get the chance and my instruments fit in. I find that early 19th century flutes can work really well with sensitive guitar players. I also play house concerts (for fun) with friends.

*KS: What led you to set up your website?*

RW: I wanted to showcase and catalog my collection, while sharing things I had learned about and from the flutes. Few flutists today realize how many flute types existed and how greatly national styles differed before 1900. Also, I have a lot of hands-on experience (and opinions) that I wanted to share. And I was not happy with the way old flutes are too often spoken of: "They don't get no respect." One can read in modern books and articles that the simple system flute "clearly could not fulfill the requirements of the 19th century" and that it has a tone that is "inferior" or "deficient in quality." It is of course possible to criticize early flutes for various reasons (e.g., they are not always easy to play), but this general condemnation (especially of tone) is just modern prejudice and I wanted to present the other side.

*KS: How long has the website been in existence?*

RW: Since 2003.

*KS: Did you do it on your own?*

RW: Yes. After getting a domain name and a web host, I learned HTML from a book. The format of my site is really very simple.

*KS: Do you get many visitors?*

RW: More than 5,000 different people visited in January, some several times and most viewing a number of pages. The pages other than the home page that were visited most included the

pages on renaissance flutes (503 hits), baroque flutes (454), 19th century Boehm flutes (245), classical flutes (235), etc. The combined pages on 19th century simple system flutes received 588 viewings. Fingering charts were popular. I am proud of my comprehensive fingering chart for simple system flutes, and it was viewed 355 times that month.

*KS: Do your visitors ever send you any interesting email?*

RW: Yes, definitely. For example, a Spanish collector recently told me that the official flute at the Madrid Conservatory until 1888 was the 12-key Tulou "flûte perfectionnée." Some visitors write to ask for information about an "old flute" a grandparent left to them. I try to help when it is a 19th century flute, but often it is just a student model Boehm flute from the 1950s. Those are not old flutes for me. I know little about 20th century Boehm flutes, and nothing about their value or what the serial numbers mean.

*KS: Do people ever want to see your collection in person?*

RW: I've had some important flute people stop by to look or try, but only once or twice a year. I can't imagine refusing a potential visitor unless I was busy at the time. I often bring out flutes to show non-flutist friends and guests at home, when the subject comes up. Anyone can appreciate them as works of art and engineering.

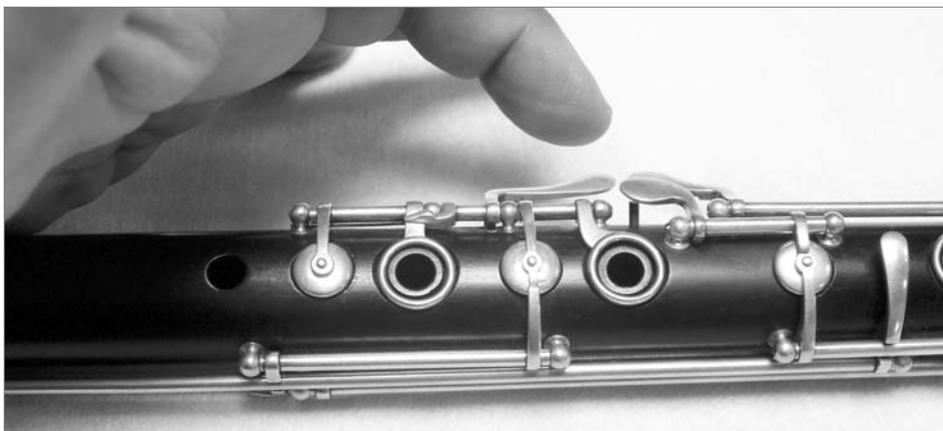
*KS: Is your collecting guided by any particular interests or objectives?*

RW: The huge variety of historical flutes fascinates me. Especially with regard to 19th century instruments, my objective is to acquire professional or near-professional quality instruments representing major trends, periods, and locations in Europe and America. As a rule, I am not interested in, for example, mid-19th century one- or four-key flutes, as only amateurs and students would have used them then. And as a rule, I am not interested in one-of-a-kind curiosities.

I cannot find or afford many original 18th century (or earlier!) flutes, so I have many modern replicas of such instruments. In addition to mainstream types, I do seek out less common but historically important models, such as



*The left-hand section of an "Equisonant" Flute by J. Clinton, London, c.1858. (R. S. Rockstro condemned the Clinton Equisonant flute. But RW says, "It is a very fine design, with a good sound, similar to that of a conical Boehm flute. See <http://www.oldflutes.com/articles/equis.htm>.")*



*Details of articulated keys on a flute by Benedikt Pentenrieder (Munich, c. 1845).*

copies of a C-foot Denner flute (c.1720), a two-key Quantz flute (c.1740), and a multi-keyed Tromlitz flute (c.1790).

I love to play a piece of music on a flute from the same period and location when/where the music was composed. This is why I need so many flutes. I wish that all flutists and listeners could enjoy this kind of experience.

*KS: I guess that's one reason you are so happy to do lecture/demonstrations . . . Can you give us an example of a sample program?*

RW: I usually play 10 to 12 flutes, starting with the renaissance and proceeding chronologically. I show slides of period costumes and closeups of parts of the instruments. I like to demonstrate the meantone intonation of the renaissance flute and the lively trills on the baroque flute. When I get to the 19th century, I might play an extract illustrating "notes sensible" from Tulou's *Méthode* on a five-key flute stamped "Tulou," an excerpt illustrating "glides and vibrations" from Nicholson's *Preceptive Lessons* on a flute stamped "Nicholson's Improved," and examples showing the difference between "Klopfen" and "Bebung" from Fürstenau's *Die Kunst des Flötenspiels* on a flute by W. Liebel of Dresden, Fürstenau's favorite maker.

*KS: You mentioned that you try to avoid the term "eight-key flute" as a generic for the common pre-Boehm multi-keyed flute.*

RW: I usually say "simple system flute," and I like to put "pre-Boehm" in quotes because the system was in use well into the 20th century. English lan-

guage sources use "eight-key flute" because that type was so standard in England (and the US); but as a mathematician, I'd feel stupid using "eight-key flute" to describe French flutes with five keys or German flutes with nine or eleven keys.

*KS: How do you balance historical integrity and playability when your old flutes need restoration/repair?*

RW: Good question. Playability is very important to me. There is much to be learned from playing and hearing these instruments. (This distinguishes my collection from many others, especially those in museums. Museums have a different mission, and I completely understand this.)

Historical integrity is essential and is the key to playability, because when these flutes were new, they were eminently playable. I want to get the flutes back to that condition (few flutes are playable when I get them; they need parts, crack repair, and more). But I don't think that only historical methods of repair are to be used. For me, super glue, power tools, and modern pads are fine. But I do want to match metals and woods as well as possible.

There are craftsmen/artisans who respect and understand the instruments and their makers. Rod Cameron, a historical flute maker who has done wonderful work for me, tells me that he often imagines himself as the embodiment of the original maker, continuing the same work and striving for the same goals. I think others who have helped me, my friends Michael Hubbert (a genius at working with any material) and Joe Moir (who knows every system

of wind and brass instrument ever made), share this attitude as well.

I would never change a working part if it seems to be near-original. I would never modify an original embouchure, never shorten a flute or enlarge the tone holes in an attempt to change the pitch, never change the bore of an instrument if it is in near original condition. I can't learn how a flute might have sounded and been played if changes like this are made. But, for example, many wooden flutes from early in the 19th century have had their embouchures crudely enlarged later in that century, to accommodate higher pitches; in such cases I do not hesitate to have the embouchure bushed and recut. (I understand what results is only an approximation of an original instrument.) If I have new parts made, I save the old broken parts with the flute. I will leave some blemishes, modifications, and old working repairs intact, as they are part of the history of the instrument

Here is an interesting point. I have cleaned and repadded, or more extensively restored, some instruments only to find that they did not play well for me. That is, they were out of tune or did not produce a good sound. Rather than attempt retuning or getting rid of the instruments, I put them on a shelf. Many times I will take them down five or ten years later to find that they now play well, or at least have good qualities. What has happened is not that the flute changed, but that I, in the interim, have learned how to play historical flutes better. What seemed difficult, I can now manage, and some of these instruments become favorites. Thank goodness that I did not irresponsibly try to modify these instruments to better fit me, when it was I that did not understand the instrument. As a collector, I have the luxury of being able to have the instrument wait until I catch up to it.

*KS: Thank you so much! I look forward to many more visits to your website. □*

**Katherine Saenger** is the editor of the New York Flute Club Newsletter and a scientist at the IBM T.J. Watson Research Center in Yorktown Heights, NY.