



The Historical Transformation and Cultural Diffusion of the Ocarina: A Systematic Literature Review on Its Global Evolution and Introduction to Indonesia

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Abstract

This article presents a literature review on the historical transformation and cultural diffusion of the ocarina, with a particular focus on its global evolution and its emergence in Indonesia. As a member of the vessel-flute family, the ocarina has undergone a long historical trajectory, evolving from a prehistoric artifact into a modern musical instrument with both educational and artistic functions. The literature indicates that the modern form of the ocarina was developed in Italy by Giuseppe Donati in the nineteenth century and subsequently disseminated to various regions of the world through trade routes, music education, and popular culture. In Indonesia, the ocarina has begun to attract attention as an alternative musical instrument in primary education and as part of creative clay-based craftsmanship. This study underscores the importance of cross-cultural perspectives in understanding the evolution of musical instruments and recommends further research focusing on local practices, craft production, and pedagogical integration within educational institutions.

Keywords: *ocarina, vessel flute, music history, cultural diffusion, music education, Indonesia*

INTRODUCTION

The ocarina is a musical instrument belonging to the vessel-flute family, namely wind instruments characterized by a closed chamber and finger holes that produce sound through the principle of air resonance. From an organological perspective, the ocarina is classified as a closed vessel aerophone, in which sound production originates from the vibration of an enclosed air column rather than from reeds or vibrating membranes. This structural characteristic distinguishes the ocarina from tubular flutes and positions it as a unique category within aerophonic instruments. The ocarina possesses a long and trans-cultural history, having appeared in various forms, materials, and sizes across numerous civilizations throughout the world. Its widespread presence across different historical periods and geographical regions highlights its adaptability and enduring relevance as a musical and cultural artifact.

Within the framework of musical archaeology, early forms of ocarina-like instruments have been identified in ancient China, where they are known as the xun, as well as in the

Mesoamerican region within the Maya and Aztec civilizations, which employed similar vessel flutes for religious rituals, ceremonial practices, and social communication (Marcus, 2021). These early instruments were often crafted from clay, stone, or bone and were embedded within cosmological beliefs, ritual symbolism, and communal traditions. Such archaeological evidence indicates that the ocarina functioned not merely as a musical device, but also as a cultural symbol imbued with profound spiritual, ritualistic, and social meanings. Its use in sacred contexts underscores the role of sound as a medium connecting human communities with metaphysical and social dimensions of life.

A significant milestone in the historical development of the ocarina occurred in the nineteenth century when Giuseppe Donati, a craftsman from Budrio, Italy, created the modern form of the instrument. Donati refined both the physical structure and the pitch system of the ocarina, enabling it to perform a complete diatonic scale with greater tonal stability and accurate intonation (Perono Cacciafoco, 2019). His innovations included standardized finger hole placement and improved acoustic balance, which transformed the ocarina into a reliable melodic instrument capable of ensemble and solo performance. From this development emerged the term ocarina, derived from the Bolognese dialect meaning “little goose,” which subsequently became the official and internationally recognized name of the instrument. Donati’s contributions marked a crucial transformation of the ocarina from a folk artifact and simple toy into a legitimate artistic musical instrument acknowledged within formal musical contexts. Alongside the spread of European music traditions and the Industrial Revolution, which facilitated the mass production and global distribution of musical instruments, the ocarina disseminated widely across continents and was adapted into diverse local musical traditions (Taylor, 2015).

From the perspective of cultural diffusion, the ocarina exemplifies how musical instruments migrate across geographical boundaries and social functions through mechanisms such as trade networks, cultural exchange, formal music education, and popular media. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the ocarina experienced a resurgence of global popularity, largely driven by mass media and the entertainment industry. A notable catalyst was the video game *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, which introduced the instrument to a new generation of audiences worldwide and significantly increased its visibility and cultural appeal (Warren, 2015). Beyond popular culture, the ocarina’s compact size, ease of play, affordability, and accessibility have made it particularly suitable for elementary music

education, music therapy, and community-based musical activities. These characteristics have contributed to its continued relevance in both formal and informal educational settings.

In Indonesia, the ocarina has gained recognition through several channels, including the importation of musical instruments, arts education programs in primary schools, and creative communities that develop locally inspired clay-based versions of the instrument. Indonesian artisans and young designers have begun producing ocarinas that incorporate indigenous cultural elements, such as animal figures and batik-inspired ornamental motifs, thereby blending global musical heritage with local artistic identity (Bobo, 2024). National media outlets, including Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI), have reported initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting ocarina-based music education as part of broader efforts in cultural education and traditional craftsmanship (RRI, 2024). These developments reveal a dynamic interaction between global cultural heritage and local creativity, enriching Indonesia's musical landscape and craft traditions while reinforcing the ocarina's educational and cultural value.

This literature review aims to trace the historical transformation and cultural diffusion of the ocarina from global to local perspectives. Specifically, the study addresses three main objectives: (1) examining the historical roots and early forms of the ocarina across various world civilizations; (2) analyzing the morphological and functional transformation of the instrument from a ritual object to a modern musical instrument; and (3) exploring the emergence and adaptation of the ocarina in Indonesia within the contexts of education, craftsmanship, and popular culture. A literature review approach is employed to provide a comprehensive synthesis of scholarly, historical, and cultural sources relevant to the topic. Through this study, it is expected that readers will gain a broader and deeper understanding of how a seemingly simple instrument such as the ocarina can serve as a rich cross-cultural representation encompassing aesthetic, historical, educational, and sociocultural values.

METHOD

This study employs a literature review approach as the primary methodological framework to examine the historical transformation and cultural diffusion of the ocarina as a musical instrument. This approach is considered appropriate because it enables the systematic collection, critical evaluation, and synthesis of a wide range of previous scholarly works related to the history, morphology, social functions, and dissemination of the ocarina at both global and local levels (Snyder, 2019). A literature review method allows researchers to construct a comprehensive conceptual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation by drawing

upon existing knowledge without direct field involvement. Moreover, this approach facilitates the identification of recurring patterns, divergences, and interconnections among existing findings, thereby contributing to a coherent and integrative interpretation of the ocarina's historical and cultural development.

The research process was conducted through four main stages. The first stage involved the collection of relevant literature sources. These sources comprised academic publications such as peer-reviewed journal articles, ethnomusicology textbooks, master's theses and doctoral dissertations, research reports, and digital documents published by official institutions and museum archives. In addition to academic sources, the study also incorporated credible popular articles, music encyclopedias, and online publications that provide historical documentation and descriptions of ocarina practices in various countries. Within the Indonesian context, the sources included national media reports, educational articles, and local scholarly works addressing the production, dissemination, and pedagogical use of the ocarina in primary schools and artistic communities.

The second stage consisted of a critical evaluation of source quality. The selected literature was assessed based on its credibility, relevance, and contribution to the research topic. Credibility criteria included the clarity and traceability of references, the academic reputation of the authors or publishing institutions, and the consistency of historical data presented within the sources. The researcher also distinguished between primary sources, such as archaeological reports, museum archives, and original historical records related to Giuseppe Donati, and secondary sources, including analyses, reviews, and interpretive works produced by other scholars. This evaluative process was essential to minimize interpretative bias and to ensure historical accuracy and validity in reconstructing the narrative of the ocarina's evolution.

The third stage involved thematic analysis, which was conducted by systematically categorizing data and information into four interrelated thematic domains that correspond to the central focus of the study. The first theme concerns the origins and early evidence of the ocarina, encompassing archaeological findings as well as the cultural and historical contexts in which vessel-flute-like instruments initially emerged. This theme includes discussions of material evidence, geographical distribution, and the symbolic roles of early ocarina forms within ancient societies. Attention is given to how these instruments functioned within ritual, ceremonial, and communal practices, thereby situating the ocarina within broader cultural and cosmological frameworks.

The second theme addresses the transformation of ocarina morphology and pitch systems over time. This theme examines structural developments, changes in materials, and refinements in acoustic design, with particular emphasis on the contributions of Giuseppe Donati in standardizing the modern ocarina form. It also explores the development of a stable diatonic pitch system, which enabled the instrument to function effectively within Western musical contexts. Furthermore, this theme considers typological variations of the ocarina across different regions, highlighting how local adaptations influenced form, tuning, and performance practice.

The third theme focuses on cultural diffusion and the social functions of the ocarina. This theme highlights the pathways through which the instrument spread across geographical boundaries, including trade networks, colonial encounters, formal and informal music education systems, and popular culture. Special attention is given to the ways in which the ocarina's function evolved as it moved between contexts, shifting from ritual and folk usage to recreational, educational, and commercial purposes. This thematic focus underscores the dynamic relationship between musical instruments and the social environments in which they are embedded.

The fourth theme examines the emergence and contemporary practice of the ocarina in Indonesia. This theme encompasses discussions of local production processes, design adaptations influenced by Indonesian cultural symbols, and the utilization of the ocarina within educational settings and artistic craftsmanship. It also addresses the role of schools, creative communities, and media in introducing and sustaining the ocarina within Indonesian musical life. Through this theme, the study highlights how global musical heritage is reinterpreted and localized within Indonesia's cultural and educational landscape.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Historical Review and Transformation of the Ocarina

If there are statistical formulas used as part of the research method, it is best not to write down formulas that are commonly used. For example, there are specific provisions set by researchers to collect and analyze research data which can be explained in this method section. Authors are advised to provide reference sources for the methods used. Articles may contain tables and/or images. Tables or figures should not be too long, too big, or too many. Writers should use variations in the presentation of tables and figures. The tables and figures presented must be referenced in the text.

The origins of the ocarina can be traced back to the prehistoric period, when early human societies began developing simple wind instruments made of clay or bone, commonly referred to as vessel flutes. These instruments rely on an enclosed cavity to produce sound through air resonance and have been discovered at numerous archaeological sites worldwide, with estimated ages ranging from 10,000 to 12,000 years (Marcuse, 1975; Montagu, 2007). Such findings demonstrate that vessel-shaped musical instruments were not the product of a single culture but rather emerged through parallel evolutionary processes in different regions, each shaped by distinct social, ritual, and ecological contexts.

One of the earliest and most significant examples originates from ancient China in the form of the xun (埙), a clay vessel flute with an egg-like shape that has been played since the Neolithic period and frequently uncovered at archaeological sites around the Yellow River basin. The xun functioned not only as a musical instrument but also as a ceremonial object and a symbol of social status (Wang & Wang, 2010). In East Asian traditions, the xun later developed into an important instrument within court music and Confucian ritual practices, reinforcing its role as both an artistic and philosophical medium.

Meanwhile, in the Mesoamerican region, different forms of vessel flutes developed independently. The Maya, Aztec, and Inca civilizations produced a wide variety of whistle vessels, often shaped to resemble animals or human figures. These instruments served dual purposes as ritual objects and folk toys, reflecting the close relationship between musical expression and spirituality in pre-Columbian cultures (Olsen, 2018). Some of these instruments were designed with double chambers, enabling them to produce multiple pitches or imitate natural and animal sounds, particularly birds, within ceremonial and religious contexts (Stevenson, 1968).

When European explorers first encountered the Americas in the sixteenth century, they documented these Mesoamerican instruments and noted their similarities to folk wind instruments found in southern Europe. Early written accounts by European observers, especially from Spain and Italy, became an important channel of knowledge that later influenced the emergence of the modern ocarina in Europe (Perono Cacciafoco, 2019). Consequently, the distribution of vessel-flute forms and principles illustrates a pattern of transcontinental cultural diffusion, even though many of these instruments evolved independently in accordance with the spiritual, environmental, and social needs of each society.

The term ocarina originates from the Bolognese dialect of Italy and means “little goose,” derived from oca (goose). Etymologically, the name reflects the instrument’s bird-like shape,

with finger holes symbolically resembling wings and a beak (Baines, 1992). Although various forms of vessel flutes had been known in Europe since the Middle Ages, the modern ocarina was not standardized until the mid-nineteenth century by Giuseppe Donati (1836–1925) of Budrio, near Bologna. Donati, originally a maker of folk instruments, produced the first ocarina with eight finger holes between approximately 1853 and 1860. He also developed a diatonic tuning system that enabled the ocarina to be played harmoniously alongside other musical instruments (Tobin, 2004).

Donati's work marked a crucial transformation of the ocarina from a simple folk instrument into a concert-capable musical device with a systematic tonal structure. His instruments gained wider recognition through the Ocarina Ensemble of Budrio, a performing group that toured various European countries and introduced the soft timbre and distinctive sound of the ocarina to international audiences (Wright, 2011). Throughout the twentieth century, further innovations were made to Donati's design. In England, John Taylor developed the four-hole pendant ocarina, which was smaller, more portable, and particularly suitable for children's music education (Taylor, 1960). At the same time, artisans in Japan and Korea adapted the Italian ocarina design using local aesthetics and craftsmanship techniques, resulting in the Japanese transverse ocarina, which later achieved global popularity. This process of standardization and innovation enabled the ocarina to enter the educational musical instrument industry worldwide and to become part of community music movements in many countries, including Indonesia.

From an organological perspective, the ocarina is classified as a closed vessel aerophone, in which pitch is determined by the resonance of enclosed air volume rather than by the length of a tubular column (Hornbostel & Sachs, 1961). Traditionally, ocarinas were made from clay or ceramic materials due to their malleability and stable acoustic properties. However, with technological advancements and changing practical demands, a variety of new materials, such as wood, metal, glass, and plastic, have been increasingly employed since the mid-twentieth century (Hickman, 2015).

In modern typological terms, the ocarina exists in several principal forms. These include the transverse ocarina, often referred to as the "sweet potato" type, which is horizontally oriented, derived from Donati's design, offers a wide pitch range, and is commonly used in ensembles. Another form is the pendant ocarina, also known as the English or Peruvian type, which is smaller, worn around the neck, typically features four to six finger holes, and is widely used for introductory music education. Inline ocarinas, shaped like short cylindrical flutes with

aligned finger holes, resemble compact recorders, while multi-chamber ocarinas incorporate two or more resonating chambers to extend pitch range and produce simple harmonies (Tobin, 2004).

These transformations in material and form reflect the ocarina's ongoing adaptation to shifting contexts of use, moving from spiritual and ritual functions toward aesthetic, educational, and recreational purposes. In contemporary music education, particularly at the primary school level, the ocarina has proven to be an effective medium for introducing basic musical concepts such as pitch, breath control, and expressive performance due to its technical simplicity and accessibility (Marcus, 2021). Innovations such as ABS plastic ocarinas further enhance durability, affordability, and suitability for large-scale educational implementation, reinforcing the instrument's relevance in modern pedagogical settings.

Cultural Diffusion and Social Functions

The cultural diffusion of the ocarina demonstrates complex dynamics across space and time, reflecting how musical practices can transform from localized contexts into global phenomena. Historically, the ocarina has fulfilled diverse social and symbolic functions depending on the cultural environments in which it developed. In Mesoamerica, vessel flutes resembling the ocarina played a central role in religious rituals and spiritual ceremonies, often used to imitate natural sounds, summon spirits, or accompany sacred dances (Stevenson, 1968). Their forms, frequently shaped as animals or mythological figures, reinforced their symbolic function as mediums of communication between humans and the supernatural realm (Olsen, 2018).

In contrast, in Europe, particularly following the discovery and diffusion of similar instruments through colonial encounters and the exchange of archaeological artifacts, the social function of vessel flutes underwent a significant shift. As European interest in so-called "exotic" cultures from the New World increased during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, vessel flutes from Mesoamerica and Asia began to enter museum collections and ethnographic studies (Marcuse, 1975). Through trade networks and international exhibitions, the concept of vessel-shaped wind instruments inspired European folk instrument makers, including artisans in northern Italy who later developed the classical form of the ocarina (Perono Cacciafoco, 2019).

The transformation of the ocarina's function from a ritual artifact into a folk musical instrument marked an important stage in the process of cultural diffusion. In the nineteenth century, Giuseppe Donati's innovations in Budrio enabled the ocarina to function as a fully

playable musical instrument with a standardized pitch system. As a result, the ocarina became part of popular entertainment culture and a community music instrument in Europe (Wright, 2011). Within this context, the ocarina served as a medium of social expression and a symbol of local identity, particularly in Italy, where ocarina ensembles became a distinctive feature of the musical culture of the Emilia-Romagna region.

During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the cultural diffusion of the ocarina expanded transnationally and multimodally, accelerated by globalization and the development of digital technologies. The instrument spread to East Asia, especially Japan, Korea, and China, through music education systems and the recreational musical instrument industry (Hickman, 2015). Japan emerged as one of the world's major centers of ocarina production and innovation, with manufacturers such as Osawa and Focalink developing ergonomic designs and modern tuning systems. In many Asian contexts, the ocarina serves dual functions: as a foundational instrument in school music education and as a medium for creative expression within amateur music communities (Marcus, 2021).

Global popular culture phenomena have further reinforced the social and economic status of the ocarina. One of the most influential examples is the video game *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998), which symbolically associates the instrument with elements of magic, nostalgia, and adventure. The cultural impact of this media representation has been substantial, leading to increased global sales of ocarinas, the emergence of fan communities, and the mass production of affordable plastic ocarinas (Hutson, 2019). In this context, the ocarina has undergone a rearticulation of meaning, from a historical artifact to an icon of digital culture that bridges the past and modernity.

Beyond popular culture, the ocarina also fulfills important contemporary social functions as an educational and therapeutic musical instrument. Research in music education indicates that the use of the ocarina in primary schools is effective in introducing fundamental concepts such as breath control, embouchure, and intonation due to its lightweight structure and ease of play (Marcus, 2021). Within community settings, the ocarina functions as an inclusive medium that facilitates musical participation across different ages and social backgrounds. Its originally ritualistic role has thus transformed into a pedagogical tool and a socio-cultural medium that strengthens musical interaction within modern society.

The Emergence and Development of the Ocarina in Indonesia

The early traces of the emergence and development of the ocarina in Indonesia remain relatively limited in academic scholarship; however, they can be identified through various

popular documents, online educational sources, and locally circulating product design works. These sources indicate that the ocarina has become widely recognized as a simple clay-based wind instrument used both for educational purposes and as a regional craft product. Educational portals such as P2K STEKOM and Indonesian Wikipedia note that ocarinas are locally produced by artisans in several regions of Indonesia, particularly in clay craft centers such as Kasongan (Yogyakarta), Plered (Purwakarta), and Kasongan (Bali), with primary orientations toward educational use and cultural tourism.

Within the educational context, the ocarina has emerged as an alternative musical instrument in primary and secondary schools due to its affordability, lightweight construction, and ease of play for children. Several educational platforms, including *Bobo.id* and *Rumah Belajar* of the Ministry of Education and Culture, describe the ocarina as part of “modern traditional wind instruments,” referring to instruments that combine local educational practices with external musical influences. Its availability in school music supply markets has strengthened the position of the ocarina as a basic learning medium for introducing melodic concepts, breath control, and harmonic awareness (Supriyadi, 2020).

Nevertheless, academic studies that systematically trace the historical pathways of the ocarina’s introduction into the Indonesian archipelago remain scarce. There is no strong evidence suggesting that the ocarina has roots in Indonesia’s indigenous musical traditions prior to the twentieth century. This condition indicates that the presence of the ocarina in Indonesia is most likely the result of modern cultural diffusion rather than an extension of traditional Indonesian wind instruments such as the bamboo flute (*suling*), *serunai*, or *saluang*.

Student academic works in the fields of product design and arts education, particularly from institutions such as the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) Yogyakarta, Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), and the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), constitute an important source of early documentation on local ocarina development. Several design projects explore the adaptation of local forms and motifs, such as batik ornamentation, wayang carvings, or representations of Indonesian fauna, as efforts to embed cultural identity into an instrument rooted in global musical traditions (Putra & Santoso, 2019). Thus, despite limited academic data, popular and institutional evidence suggests that the ocarina has gradually transformed into part of Indonesia’s educational practices and local creative expression.

A review of popular literature, media reports, and educational materials indicates that the introduction of the ocarina into Indonesia occurred through several interconnected pathways, namely trade, education, local craftsmanship, and popular culture. In terms of trade and

importation, modern ocarinas, particularly transverse and pendant types made of plastic or ceramic, began circulating in Indonesia in the early 2000s through the distribution of imported musical instruments from China, Japan, and Italy (Rahman, 2017). Music stores and online marketplaces such as Tokopedia and Shopee expanded public access to these products. The distinctive features of imported ocarinas, including bright colors, ergonomic designs, and affordable prices, contributed to their popularity as recreational musical instruments among students and hobbyists. This trade-based pathway reflects a global diffusion pattern driven by the commercialization of music education and hobby culture.

From an educational perspective, the ocarina became known as a basic instructional instrument that is easy to use in primary schools. A number of music teachers introduced it through extracurricular activities, particularly in schools with limited access to conventional musical instruments. Basic ocarina learning guides also began to appear in online modules and instructional videos produced by teachers and local music communities. The use of the ocarina in schools aligns with arts education policies that emphasize participatory and creative learning, as outlined in the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which promotes experiential learning approaches (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Alongside educational adoption, local craftsmanship has played a significant role in the diffusion of the ocarina in Indonesia. As public interest increased, clay artisans in several craft centers began producing locally made ocarinas featuring Indonesian cultural motifs. Production typically employs traditional firing techniques and designs adapted to local aesthetics, such as tropical animal forms or batik patterns. These activities are not only economically oriented but also carry educational and cultural value, as they introduce concepts of sound art to children and tourists. Several undergraduate and final projects in product design and craft studies, such as those from ISI Denpasar and Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta (UNY), have even developed prototype ocarinas with Nusantara ethnic themes, indicating a process of glocalization of a global musical instrument within the Indonesian context (Putra & Santoso, 2019).

Popular culture and digital media have also been important factors in the dissemination of the ocarina in Indonesia. The global influence of the video game *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998) contributed to renewed interest among Indonesian youth in learning and playing the instrument. This phenomenon has been further reinforced by educational content on YouTube and social media platforms, featuring ocarina tutorials, children's songs, and small-scale community performances in major cities such as Yogyakarta,

Bandung, and Surabaya. The involvement of online communities has accelerated the communalization of simple wind music practices and positioned the ocarina as part of Indonesia's contemporary digital cultural trends (Hutson, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This literature review affirms that the historical trajectory of the ocarina reflects a complex interplay between historical transformation, cultural diffusion, and local adaptation. Historically, the ocarina originates from prehistoric vessel-flute traditions found across ancient civilizations, such as the xun in China and various Mesoamerican cultures, where it initially functioned within ritualistic and symbolic contexts. The nineteenth-century innovations of Giuseppe Donati marked a crucial phase of organological standardization, transforming the ocarina into a pedagogically and professionally viable musical instrument in Europe. Its subsequent global diffusion was facilitated by trade networks, colonial encounters, and transcontinental knowledge exchange, which introduced the instrument to regions including Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, the ocarina emerged primarily through educational practices, musical instrument imports, and popular media, evolving into an effective alternative instrument for elementary music education due to its accessibility, safety, and affordability. Furthermore, the development of local design and production initiatives demonstrates how Indonesian communities have actively localized the ocarina through processes of glocalization, reinforcing cultural identity, creative craftsmanship, and the creative economy. At the same time, the influence of global popular culture, most notably *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, has expanded the social visibility and commercial reach of the ocarina within contemporary society.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The author was responsible for the conceptualization of the study, literature collection and analysis, data synthesis and interpretation, and the writing and revision of the manuscript. All aspects of the research and manuscript preparation were conducted by the author

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