



## Flute (nguru)

---

**On display**

**Title/Description:** Flute (nguru)

**Born:** 1800 - 1850

**Object Type:** Musical instrument

**Materials:** Haliotis iris shell, Wood

**Measurements:** h. 168 x w. 60 x d. 70 mm

**Accession Number:** 181

**Historic Period:** 19th century - Early/Mid

**Production Place:** New Zealand, North Island, Northland, Oceania, Pacific

**Cultural Group:** Māori

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

---

Taonga puoro is the term for traditional Māori musical instruments. They are closely related to the atua (gods and spirits) and are therefore highly regarded and treated with great respect. It is said that Hineraukatauri, the goddess of music, turned into a moth so that she could be with her flute and never be parted from it. Each taonga puoro will have its own personal name. [1]

Flutes (nguru) in particular were played for many reasons: to accompany dance, songs, and the spoken word; to assist conception and childbirth; to heal and mourn death; for hunting and signalling; and entertainment. With European arrival, the knowledge, production, and use of taonga puoro almost completely disappeared, but many Māori and Pākehā musicians, carvers, and academics have been reviving the use of such instruments since the 1990s. Today these instruments are being made, and their playing taught to others around Aotearoa New Zealand.

How should this particular nguru be played? An nguru can be played through the upturned spout with the nose, or by blowing into the larger end at an angle. Playing with the nose creates a sobbing tone that is much softer than playing with the mouth. However, due to the addition of the loop and sunken hole on this example, performing with the nose may be almost impossible. Perhaps the intended way of playing this particular nguru is with the mouth. This is how Alistair Fraser played it when he visited the Sainsbury Centre in 2016, on his tour of playing traditional Māori instruments throughout the UK. Below is a sound recording of this flute being played during his visit.

Richard Nunns, a pioneer in the revival of taonga puoro, explains that he encountered a moment where an nguru's new owner sung softly into the flute in order for it to learn its voice and to activate it. [2] It is clearly a private and intimate connection between the taonga puoro and its owner that needs to be felt.

Kaitlyn Neve, October 2020

[1] Te Ara. n.d. 'Māori Musical Instruments - Taonga Puoro' in: Te Ara. Accessed 26 October 2020 <https://teara.govt.nz/en/maori-musical-instruments-taonga-puoro/page-1>

[2] Richard Nunns and Allan Thomas, *Te Ara Puoro*. (Nelson, N.Z.: Craig Potton Publishing. 2014), p.22.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

The Māori developed several forms of musical instrument [1] and this type, with a curving terminal, has often been erroneously identified as a 'nose flute', because it was formerly thought that it was nose-blown through the small aperture at the curved end. However, it is now clear that it was mouth-blown at the larger aperture in a similar manner to the tubular *koauau* flute [2]. Both instruments were apparently used to accompany *waiata*, sung poems.

This fine, boldly carved example has four stops, two towards the mouthpiece and two at the curved end, one of which is encircled by a Haliotis shell ring. A further stop close to the mouthpiece has been carefully plugged and the mouth of the main figure carved on the opposite side is recessed behind the tongue to form a lug for a suspension cord.

An unusual feature of the flute is that the curving terminal is joined to the main body of the instrument. The straight-bored interior and crisply finished carving suggest metal tool work of the first part of the nineteenth century, and the flute most probably originates from the Bay of Islands area of Northland, for it exhibits two carving styles distinctive to that region, firstly meandering raised parallel lines endosing notches, and secondly the *unaunahi* 'rolling spiral' design on the limbs of the main figure [3].

Steven Hooper, 1997

[1] J.C. Anderson, *Maori Music with its Polynesian Background* (New Plymouth: Memoirs of the Polynesian Society; 10).

[2] M.E. McLean, An Investigation of the open tube Maori flute or *kooauau*, *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 77, 1968, pp.213-41.

[3] S.M. Mead (ed.) *Te Maori: Maori art from New Zealand Collections* (New York, 1984).

---

---

## Further Reading

Steven Hooper (ed.) Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. II, Pacific, African and Native North American Art. Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, in association with University of East Anglia, 1997, p.10.

---

## Provenance

Formerly in the Pitt Rivers Museum at Farnham, Dorset.

Acquired by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury in 1971.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

---