

The Persian Ney

by Rick Wilson

Introduction

The Western use of the term “ney,” an Arabic word, usually refers to one of three flutes that are common in the Middle East: the Arabic ney, the Turkish ney, and the Persian ney. The word “ney” may also be spelled “nay” or “nai.” We remark that there are numerous instruments in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Africa, modern and historic, that are similar to or related to neys, but are known by different names.



Figure 1. Top to bottom: Arabic, Turkish, and Persian neys.

Neyes are end-blown flutes made of a reed section, open at both ends. They are played more-or-less vertically, but frequently angled somewhat to the front, and/or to the left or right of the player. The flutist directs the airstream toward a point on the rim or edge of one of the ends, which may be just the smoothed end of the reed or part of a simple mouthpiece. The Arabic and Turkish neys have a thumb hole and six finger holes, while the Persian ney is furnished with five finger holes and a thumbhole.

The tube or body of a ney is open at both ends and is relatively narrow. The body and bore naturally taper slightly toward the far end. The length generally varies from between 40 and 80 cm according to the desired pitch.



Figure 2. Various sizes of Persian neys. The thumb hole can be seen on the back of the second ney. The gold duct tape on the left sides of three neys was applied by the author, after removing the original metal saris.

While the Arabic and Turkish neys sound similar to each other, the modern Persian ney is distinguished by a special sound which is produced with an interdental embouchure [see more below], where the rim is positioned inside the lips and rests against the teeth. This embouchure produces a much louder sound than the normal sound of the Arabic or Turkish ney in the first register.

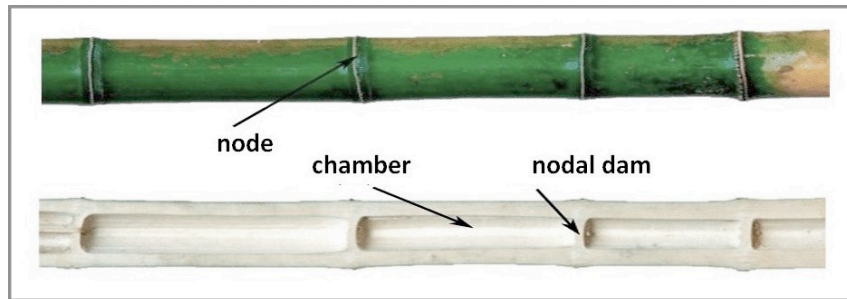


Figure 3. Yavari Hussein playing a Persian ney with the interdental embouchure.

Construction

This article focuses on the Persian ney as used in Iran from the 19th century to the present.

The interior of the reed plant stem, and similar grasses like bamboo and cane, is divided into chambers at the nodes. The five nodes of a Persian ney are usually covered by thin leather binding strips and lacquer (see Figure 4). This is done for cosmetic purposes.



The material separating the chambers may be called nodal dams, septa, or diaphragms. The nodal dams add strength to the plant, but they must be removed to obtain a hollow tube for a ney or another flute. This is done with a long thin tool or stick. However, the part of the nodal dam closest to the rim of a modern ney is perforated, but not completely removed. This construction presumably affects the playing qualities in various ways, though it may be subtle.

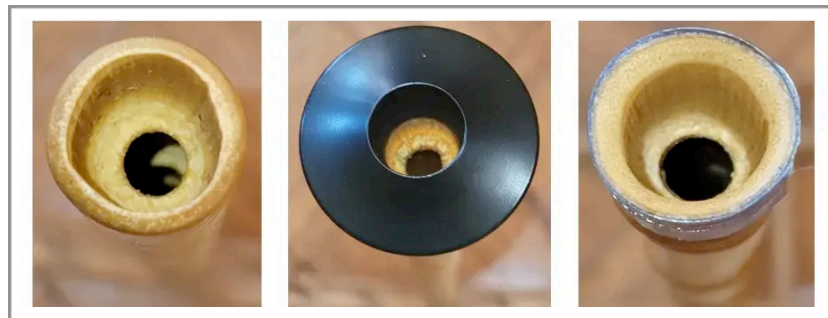


Figure 5. Looking into the mouth-ends of the Arabic, Turkish, and Persian neys, respectively (not to scale).

The far end of a Persian ney is protected from damage by a brass sheath called the toq. The mouth-end is also covered by a sheath, the sari, made of brass or plastic that protects the tapered mouth-end of the reed, and provides a relatively sharp blowing edge. Traditionally, the sari was made of metal. However, the edge of the sari is placed between the two front teeth in interdental playing (see the section on interdental embouchure) where it could damage, wear on the teeth, or feel uncomfortable if made of metal. In the past two decades, it has become common to make the sari from plastic film. It is now rare to see a new Persian ney for sale with anything but a blue plastic sari.



History and Notable Players

The ney is ancient and is said to have originated more than 5,000 years ago. We can be sure that the first makers and players of neys were shepherds. In Persia, neys were mentioned in writings from the Sasanian Dynasty (224–651 C.E.). However, with the spread of Islam, music was suppressed to varying extents in the Middle East. Despite this, the ney became, and has remained, extremely important in Sufism, a significant group within Islam which arose in the 9th century. Think of whirling dervishes.

In the Qajar Dynasty (1789–1925 C.E.), music flourished in Persia, and virtuosi and famous performers, including ney players, appeared. Other wind instruments faded away, and the ney became the only wind instrument used in Persian classical music.

Nayeb Asadollah (1889–1932 C.E.) may be called the father of the modern Persian ney. When he was young, neys in Persia were relatively short and played obliquely like Arabic and Turkish neys, meaning outside of and supported by the lips. They were still associated with shepherds and not considered capable of much of Persian music. Asadollah introduced to Persia the interdental embouchure (see below) and changed the character of the Persian ney!



Figure 7. Nayeb Asadollah

The gargy tuyduk, a ney-like flute played interdentially in Turkmenistan, which neighbors Iran on the east, likely had a strong influence on Asadollah's ideas on his embouchure. But, there were also other ethnic groups in Persia and bordering regions who played with this same method.

The modern Turkmen gargy tuyduk appears to be similar to a long, modern Persian ney, with five finger holes in front and sometimes a metal sari.

In any case, Asadollah's embouchure technique was unique and innovative, though not immediately appreciated by all other ney players. The interdental embouchure was much more powerful. It excelled at articulation, as well as the ability to vary tone, articulation, dynamics, and intonation in ways that were not possible to achieve on a "shepherd's ney." However, the embouchure can be very difficult to learn!

A forty-second excerpt from a recording by Nayeb Asadollah himself can be found on YouTube. Persian ney performances usually show off the special timbre of the first register, but Asadollah is heard playing primarily in the high registers, presumably because of the recording technology of that time. Also, note the short ney in Figure 7.

Hassan Kassai (1928–2012) was a student of Mehdi Navai, who studied with Asadollah. Yavari Hussein, shown in Figure 3, also studied with Navai. Hussein and Kassai collaborated and performed on Radio Iran in the 1940s, helping to further the popularity of the still-new ney.

However, it was Kassai who, with his virtuosity and innovations in articulation, rhythms, and tone, allowed the ney to escape its traditional role of imitating the voice. He also exploited the use of the different registers. He must be considered a second father of the ney! His videos on YouTube are highly recommended.

Tone Production: The Interdental Embouchure

For the interdental embouchure as taught in Iran, the rim of the sari, at approximately the 10:00 o'clock position, is placed between the two front teeth of the performer, inside the lips. The lower rim of the sari rests on or against a lower tooth, usually a canine tooth. The airstream is focused with the tongue and the roof of the mouth. The position of the tongue is critical, but varies depending on the player's mouth and instrument. A rough idea of the tongue position can be obtained by pronouncing "shhhh." The lips support the ney and are used to modulate the tone and pitch. Additionally, a vibrato can be produced by alternating positions of the lips.

There are many variations and types of the interdental embouchure that are used in other regions of the world, especially in Central Asia and Southern Russia. In addition, it was used by Native American flute players in the American Southwest who played long rim-blown flutes in the Basketmaker period and earlier. We can imagine that this is the embouchure used on the flutes appearing in petroglyphs of Kokopelli. It was still in use by the Hopi and Santo Domingo Puebloan peoples in the early 20th century.



Figure 8. Three positions of a Persian ney, and the author's embouchure while improvising. The last image shows the oblique embouchure used on the Arabic ney.

In Figure 9, the top flute is a three-hole tsuur from Mongolia. The middle flute is a five-hole quray from Bashkortostan, with one finger hole being a thumbhole. Traditionally, these flutes were made by shepherds from plant stems, just like modern neys. However, today both are made from wood laminate and carefully tuned.

The bottom flute in Figure 9 is a replica of a six-hole wooden rim-blown Native American flute (c. 625 C.E.) discovered in the Prayer Rock district of northeastern Arizona.



Figure 9. World flutes played interdentally.

Tuning, Notation, and Scales

Persian classical music uses a scale with 24 notes to the octave. As a simplification, we can speak of a scale of 24 quarter tones. However, to be precise, the intervals are not exactly quarter tones and are also somewhat flexible in performance.

Western notation has been adapted to Persian music. While Western music uses three accidentals (sharps, flats, and naturals), modern Persian scores use two more, the koron and the sori. The koron lowers a pitch by about 60 cents, and the sori is used to raise the pitch by about 40 cents. A quarter-tone in Western music is 50 cents. Note: Since, for example, *B* and *C* differ by a 100-cent semitone, *B* sori is the same pitch as *C* koron.

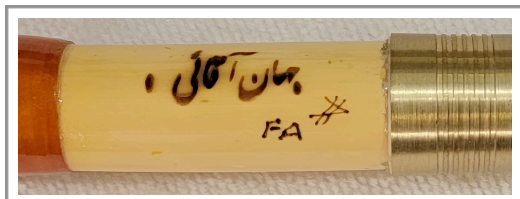


Figure 10. Koron and sori symbols, and the marking of "F sori" near the toq of a Persian ney.

It is traditional in Iran to name the size of a Persian ney by the note produced with all finger holes open (thumb hole left closed), which note is a fifth above the lowest note. So, the lowest note of the ney in Figure 10 should be *Bb* sori, three quarter-tones below middle *C*. The sequence of notes obtained by lifting successive fingers and lastly the thumb hole, starting at the bottom with all holes closed is *C-D-E* koron, *F-F#-G-A*.

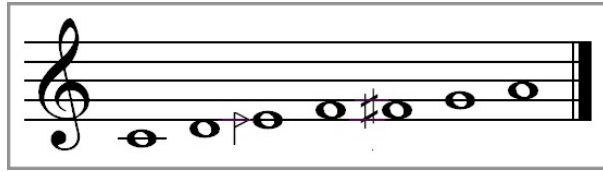


Figure 11. The first register pitches of the Persian ney.

The notes are those of the Western chromatic scale, except for *E* koron, which is between *Eb* and *E*. Perhaps, curiously, the notes *F* and *F#* never appear together in any Persian scale; rather, exactly one will be used.

A fingering chart for more than 50 pitches, in the first through fourth registers, with the fourth being very rarely used, may be found at persianney.com. Some of the pitches are produced using “half-holing,” and others by embouchure adjustments, meaning “pitch-bending.” In some instances, the same fingering is offered for two different pitches, like *E* koron and *E*.

Persian classical music consists of dastgahs. A dastgah has a seven-note basic mode or scale, but there is much more to it. We simply cannot begin to cover this expansive topic here. There are many dastgahs, but there are 12 common ones. The performer extemporizes within the rules of a dastgah.

References and Links

1. A 40-second Asadollah recording: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGy6pEvpILM
2. There are numerous videos of Persian ney players on YouTube.com. Most are solo performances, while some have drum accompaniment. There are a few ensembles that include Western instruments.
3. Search for “Hassan Kassai” on YouTube, as well as “Hassan Kassai and Taj.”
4. <https://www.persianney.com/technique.html> (accessed 11/7/2022).
5. “The Persian ney: A study of the instrument and its musical style,” Azin Movahed, DMA thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1993.