Soropipe (including straw, reed, rush and Easter whistle, kaza)

Structure and History

The blades of straw and reed pipes are usually cut in different

Adopted no later than the Middle Ages, the soropilli was the only finger-hole wind instrument known throughout Finland and Karelia. The sound of this archaic clarinet-type instrument is produced by a small single reed cut next to a node in the hollow stem of a tubular plant. Suitable materials include common reed (*Phragmites australis*), rye straw, and bear parsley (*Angelica sylvestris*)

Most pipes had only three or four finger holes, and some had none at all. Pipes without finger holes were played alternately, several at once, or musically with skilful techniques.

Soropipes were commonly made and played for pastime by children, shepherds, and fishermen. They were also used for duck hunting. The skill of carving straw pipes likely spread alongside agriculture and adoption of iron tools. During the rye harvest, sickles were sharpened and pipes were made for children; fathers carved them for their young while guarding the threshing barn.

Music was improvised, often inspired by the sounds of nature and church bells, sometimes alternating with runo singing. The most skilful players could tune their pipes and play marches and other songs. Pipes were also used for playful mischief: boys hiding in the rye fields would startle girls passing by on their way to dances.

One of the oldest traditions may be the Easter pipe custom: at night people made noise to ward off witches and ensure good fortune for the cattle. Several incantations connected with pipe-making have also been preserved. They were spoken while rolling the pipe between the palms to help it sound properly. In some areas, elders forbade children from playing, as the sound was believed to attract snakes. In Värmland, Sweden, Forest Finns played straw pipes on Christmas night to stay awake. Further East, in Karelia, the folklore collector A. O. Väisänen recorded soropilli playing in 1916, including the renowned lament singer Matjoi Plattanen.

Soropipes also suit modern life. Building reed pipes is accessible and rewarding. They encourage to express wide range of emotions, joke around, and explore own and shared natural ways of making music.

Figure 2. Enjoy nature, but wear safety glasses when collecting the stems.

Building Steps for Reed Pipe

Materials

The most durable straw pipes are made from reed harvested between January and May, rye collected at harvest, and angelica cut in September. During summer, cow parsley may also be used for short-lived pipes. Cut standing, hardened stems at the base with a knife, sickle, or sickle blade. Remove soft tops and collect stems in a bag for transport. Dry if necessary and store in a well-ventilated, dry place.

Figures 3–12. Building a reed pipe step by step

Cut the stem at the nodes into blanks
Work carefully and keep first aid supplies close at hand.
Grip the stem with your left hand just to the left of the node, and hold the knife upright behind the stem with your right hand. Press the center of the node with your thumb against the blade while simultaneously twisting the stem forward and upward.
Alternatively, hold the knife in the normal position, place the blade against the node, and press down while twisting the stem. After a few turns, grasp the stem on both sides of the node and snap it off. If it does not break cleanly, deepen the groove. From one stem, you can make about five to eight blanks.

Carve the vibrating reed
Use a utility knife or a carving knife. Hold the blank a few cm from the narrow, cylindrical tip. Set the blade about 5 mm from the tip at roughly 45° and cut through the wall. Lift the reed and lengthen it to about 3 cm by turning the blade underneath. Use your thumb at the base to prevent the reed from being cut too long. Alternatively, make the side cuts separately with a short blade. Aim for the reed to protrude slightly – about 1–2 mm – from the pipe edge.

Clean the inside
Press the reed down, and work the inside by moving a twig of birch or willow, or a round file, back and forth while rotating. Blow out any loose membrane.

Make the pipe sound
Notice: The reed must be vibrate to produce sound. Place the pipe deep in your mouth, close the end with your tongue, and blow. If no sound occurs, the issue may lie with the player, the instrument, or both. The reed may be too low, too deep/wide, too short, or too long. A small hole next to the reed can prevent sound. Try varying your blowing strengths and keep the pipe dry.

Cut finger holes
Cut 4–8 finger holes slantwise through the wall of the pipe near the base, in line with the reed. Make the next cut mirrored 3–5 mm from the first and twist the blade to loosen the piece. Cut the remaining holes as desired. You can find the major scale by starting 4 cm from the bottom and using the pattern 1–1–½–1–1–1–½. Make pipes in different keys by placing the finger holes in different positions.

Finish the finger holes
Twist a pointed round stick in each finger hole while supporting the sides. Scrape the inside of the pipe once more.

Seal the mouthpiece
Shape a pea-sized piece of beeswax into a cylinder and screw it into the pipe's mouth end, above the reed. Cut off any excess material. You can also carve a dry twig to the correct size, add a drop of glue, and press it 5 mm into the pipe's mouth end. Let it dry, saw, and smooth the surface with sandpaper.

Case for the pipe

Cut a piece of electrical conduit (ask an electrician for leftover pipe) or another suitable, preferably recycled tube, a few centimeters longer than the pipe.

For the plugs, use a dry branch about 7 cm long, slightly thicker than the tube's inner diameter. Whittle off a few centimeters of bark and surface so the plug almost fits, add a drop of glue, tap it 1–2 cm into the tube on a hard surface or with a hammer, and cut flush with the tube edge.

Whittle the remaining branch if needed so the plug extends about 2 cm inside the tube. Finish the tube edges and plug ends with a knife or sandpaper. If you like, wrap the tube with a strip of boiled birch bark or a cloth.

A case can also be made from a dry branch using a long wood drill, or from a piece of fresh elderberry branch with the soft core removed.

Kuva 13. Reed pipe with birch bark covered case

Reed pipes were built at the event "Læven og lokk – Nordic instrument-making seminar" in Oslo, 23–24 October 2025. The seminar was organized by Karstein Grønnesby and Sylvelin Hege Sevilhaug in collaboration with the Norsk lur- og bukkehornlag.

Video from the instrument-building seminar:
https://www.youtube.com/shorts/c-WmTTitUlM

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