

A Bit of Music Theory: High, Middle, Low Flutes

In general, the lowest note you can play on your flute, the note played with all 6 holes closed, is the first part of the name of the key of your flute. But the maker has deliberately made the second note from the bottom flat. This flatness makes the key of the flute “minor,” and indeed the sound of a Native American style flute can seem a bit melancholy or plaintive. So, in the second part of the name of the flute, the “m” next to the key of the flute indicates that it is a minor key. For example: A minor, or Am.

For the purposes of this class, what follows is the most common range of keys for Native American style flutes. They go from low Am to high Am, matched with some commonly-used terms for flutes within three ranges of keys. The Am notes are an octave apart.

Am, A#/Bbm, Bm, Cm, C#/Dbm, Dm, D#/Ebm, Em, Fm, F#m, Gm, G#/Abm, Am

Low

Mid

High

As you can see, “high” flutes start getting high around G#/Abm, and can go up in pitch to Am, A#Bbm, Bm, and even higher (higher flutes than Am are not shown). “Mid-range” flutes start around D#/Ebm, and go up in pitch to Em, Fm, F#m and Gm. Some folks include Dms with mid-range flutes, but they can require a real stretch and some lung capacity. A Cm flute might be considered low, with a low Bm, A#/Bbm and an Am flute going even lower.

By the way, the term “octave” can be confusing here. In concert music there are eight notes in a scale. (Actually there are twelve, but we avoid four of them most of the time.) The octave, then, jumps from a low Am to a high Am, or a low C to a high C. For Native American flutes there are only five, or if you count the highest note, six notes in a scale. We still use the term octave, though, to indicate the jump. To jump from one octave note to the other, play the lowest and highest notes in the basic scale.

For further reference, a low Cm flute plays the middle C on a piano. (Middle C is around 262 Hz on a tuner, or the white key right in front of the first of the two black keys closest to the center of a standard 88 key piano.) You can see in this overview how a “high” Cm would be one octave, or set of pitches, away from a “low” Cm, and in fact they are (or should be!) in tune with each other. In relation to the rest of the piano range, though, both Cms are somewhat high overall since they are at or higher than middle C.

Another way of putting it would be that most Native American style flutes fall into the “treble” range, that is, anything above middle C on the piano. Flutes below middle C are in the “bass” range. A contrabass Cm, then, is one octave lower than a low (or middle C) Cm. There are even sub-basses that are lower than that. Each of these octave ranges are numbered with reference to a range represented, once again, by the design of an 88 key piano. Native American style flutes generally play in octave numbers 4 and 5. Most folks, however, just use terms like “bass” or “high,” often not very specifically.

By now it should be clear that a pair of flutes pitched one octave apart from each other can make beautiful music together. The lower one can provide the bass, drone, or rhythm; the higher one can provide the treble, the melody, and the phrasing. Neither does as well without the other. In fact, playing bass to someone’s treble puts you in control of the beat and requires restraint, steadiness and sensitivity to your partner’s need for expression. These are all good things—in music and in life.