A short history of the French Flageolet

The flageolet is a small fipple flute with six holes, two of which are placed on the back and closed with the thumbs of each hand. It probably appeared towards the end of the XVIth century. It was mentioned for the first time in 1581, when played by Sieur Juvigny de Paris in *Le Ballet Comique de la Reine*, the first court ballet given and published in France in 1581.

Thoineau Arbeau devotes a paragraph to the flageolet in his *Orchésographie* (1589), in which he says that soldiers could use it as an alternative to the fife, and that the best instruments have four holes in front and two behind.

**Marin Mersenne (1637)**

There is an article on the flageolet in Marin Mersenne’s *Harmonie Universelle* published in 1636. The author describes the position of the tone holes, four in front and two behind. He also says that there are two possible positions for the hands, either using the thumb and the first two fingers of each hand, or the thumb and first three fingers of the left hand and only the thumb and index finger of the right hand. This second method became obsolete later.

In his text Mersenne says that the range of the instrument is a fifteenth (two octaves). Each horizontal line in the chart below represents one of the holes. The black marks indicate those that must be closed for each note. He also suggests partially closing the bell to play one extra note lower down when all the holes are closed.

He adds that to play the natural notes holes must be covered so as to let no air escape, and for sharps and flats they should only be partially closed.
Merenne describes two playing styles, simply blowing, as do country folk, and using articulation in an expressive way with the tongue as do accomplished musicians.

**Pierre Trichet (1640)**

Pierre Trichet wrote a treatise that remained in manuscript form and was never printed. It seems to be in part a compilation of ideas borrowed from other authors including Mersenne.

Stating that the flageolet dates back to antiquity, he seems to confuse the origins of flutes and flageolets and quotes some anecdotes that can only pertain to other fipple flutes since they took place before the 16th century.

As far as playing technique is concerned there is a fingering chart covering one octave. Trichet also suggests using numbers to identify fingerings as in the short musical example that follows.

To play higher notes, according to Trichet, the same fingerings can be used while blowing harder, which is incorrect for this instrument, on which the fingerings are in reality different in both octaves.

Trichet also notes how the flageolet can be used in ensembles and which parts can be played with it.
“On peut faire des concerts à quatre parties avec des flageolets aussi bien qu’avec des flustes en mettant la taille et la haute contre a la quinte de la basse, parce que l’estendue d’une de ces parties peut s’accomoder a l’autre, faut que le dessus soit a l’octaave de la mesma basse, laquelle peut servir d’estui audict flageolet et du dessus. Tel est un mien jeu de flageolets d’ivoire que je prise beaucoup”

Thomas Greeting (1675)

The flageolet (often spelled flagelet in English) was not only played in France. It may have crossed the Channel with the return from exile of Charles II after the austere period of Olivier Cromwell.

The earliest known method for the instrument The Gentle Companion was published in England by Thomas Greeting in 1675. He describes the flageolet as a Pleasant Companion that may be carried in the pocket and bear one company by land or by water. He also say that it has the advantage over other instruments as being always in tune « which others are not ».

The tunes in his method are all in « dot notation » (tablature) as can be seen here:

Samuel Pepys was one of Greeting’s pupils. He often quotes the flageolet in his diary.
Jean-Pierre Freilhon Poncein (1700)

Freilhon Poncein wrote a chapter on the flageolet in his method *La Véritable manière d'apprendre à jouer en perfection du hautbois, de la flûte et du flageolet* (The Real way of perfectly playing the oboe, the recorder and the flageolet). He gives the same importance to the three instruments and indicates that the flageolet can play fourteen natural notes, and that it is possible to force the instrument to play one step higher, thus giving a range of two octaves. He recommends closing the first four holes with the left hand, and the last two with the right hand, as in Mersenne's second method.
Here is a method for using the flageolet for teaching cage birds to sing popular tunes in order to give them more value.

The author uses both dot notation and conventional notes for the pieces.
Diderot & d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* (1751 – 1772)

The idea of using the instrument for teaching tunes to birds also appears in Diderot & d’Alembert’s Encyclopedia.

The instrument is described in *l’Encyclopédie*, in two forms, the *large flageolet* (fig.7), and the *bird flageolet* (fig. 5 & 6), smaller and fitted with a windcap called *le porte-vent*. The shriller bird flageolet was sometimes used for teaching tunes to canaries and other birds. Diderot also mentions that the large flageolet only differs from the other in that it has a beak instead of the windcap, and that it is made in one piece.

The author specifies that the flageolet has a range of a fifteenth (two octaves), as do Mersenne and Freilhon Poncein.

The picture above, from P. Hamelin Bergeron's *Manuel du Tourneur* (1792) shows a *flageolet à bec* of this period, in two parts with a recorder type mouthpiece.

The fact that the instrument could be described in a manual of wood turning suggests that it was very popular and widely played.
The 19th century

Until about 1800 the instrument was simply known as the flageolet. After the development of the English flageolet, a somewhat different instrument, the term French flageolet came into use to make a distinction between the two.

The windcap mentioned in Diderot's Encyclopedia, came into general use during the 19th century and became known as la pompe. It has a beneficial effect on the sound quality, and a sponge could possibly be placed inside to absorb condensation.

![Drawing of a flageolet à pompe](image)

This drawing of a flageolet à pompe appears in Victor Charles Mahillon's *Eléments d'Acoustique* (1874)

Before the turn of the 19th century French flageolets were made in different keys, particularly in D, F, G and A. From 1800 onwards the instrument in A became the most common. However, for ease of reading fingering charts and pieces were often written as for a transposing instrument in D, as shown in this chart from Fétis' *Histoire Générale de la Musique* (1872) for a keyless flageolet.

![Fingering chart](image)

The author also explains how to play semitones on the flageolet by partially closing certain holes:

*For playing low E♭ the hole for e would be half closed, for G# the hole for a would be half closed and for C# the hole for D would be half closed.*
Here is another chart showing the same method for playing D# (ø = a partially closed hole) and a fork fingering for G#.

In order to overcome these difficulties the flageolet was little by little fitted with keys so as no longer to require the use of leaking holes or fork fingerings, of which the most common were for D# and G#.

"Flageolets with keys are the most commonly used because some sharps and flats are easier to play, better intonated and louder...
Flageolets with a windcap are preferable to those without because their tone is sweeter...
The flageolet in A is the most commonly used...
The little finger of the right hand is sometimes used for partially closing the bell in order to play low C# and high D...
The flageolet can play all the notes over two octaves...
The most favourable keys are F, G, C and D... Its music is written in the treble clef."

The named keys and notes (low C# and high D, for example) suggest its use as a transposing instrument in D.

The following chart, from Eugène Roy's method for the flageolet, is again intended for a transposing instrument in D and makes use of two keys. The bottom hole on the chart is the bell, which can be partially closed with the right hand little finger as indicated in the text above.

(Source: BNF)
This was the flageolet's golden era. It was played in balls and other festivities and excellent musicians like Bousquet, Collinet and others wrote and played virtuoso pieces for it. The instrument was also popular in England.

Here is a translation of a text by Victor Charles Mahillon, in which he describes the flageolet in 1874, and gives a chart for the notes of the first register. Strangely Mahillon does not mention the use of the thumb hole as a register hole for playing high notes, as was customery on this instrument, and can be seen on the other fingering charts above. There may also be a mistake regarding the key, which should only be open for C#.

"The flageolet is a transposing instrument. This name is given to all instruments whose intonation does not correspond to the written note or one of its octaves, high or low.

With six tone holes and one key the flageolets emits the following fundamental notes

![Fingerings chart]

The instrument being of small size it is almost impossible to place all the holes on the same line without hindering the movement of the fingers, which is the reason for boring four holes on the front and two behind. The fundamental notes in this chart leap up an octave with higher breath pressure. The scale is completed at the top with a few notes making use of the third harmonic.

On very old instruments low d# was inexistant. On modern ones keys have been added to replace the fork fingering necessary for playing notes 4, 7, 9 and 11.

The flageolet's fingerings are largely the same as those of the instruments with small holes still used nowadays, which is why we will examine a few details.

Holes n° 2, 4, 5, and 6 have a double function. They give repectively f#, a, b and c#, and by closing the preceding hole f, g#, a# and c. This is the technique of fork fingerings."

The French flageolet seems to have fallen into disuse in the beginning of the twentieth century, at the time of the Great War.