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## The Didgeridoo

By Paola Lizares



Hi, students! Today's Weekly Letter has been written by me, Paola, but, for the recording, I've asked my workmate Paul Batkins for his help. Paul is so good at imitating sounds that it would be a shame not to record him for posterity. You'll soon see (or hear) what I mean...

When I was little, I learnt how to play the recorder<sup>1</sup>. When I was a teenager, I took clarinet lessons. When my father passed away, I inherited his flute<sup>2</sup>; I ought to take flute lessons, but I'm too lazy.

The truth is that I have always been attracted to wind instruments, especially to the ones that are in the G clef<sup>3</sup> (easier for me to read). I thought that I knew everything about wind instruments – until the year 1994. I was 16 years old then and I had just bought *Emergency on Planet Earth*, the first CD of one of my favourite bands, Jamiroquai (or, as my friend Sergio calls them, "Ramiro es guay"). In the first track, "When You Gonna Learn", and, especially, in the tenth track, "Didgin' Out", I heard a haunting, rhythmic, constant sound that I couldn't identify. Was it a human voice, a bass or a baritone? Was it Om, the sacred Hindu syllable? Or was it the sound of a whale farting?

No, it was a didgeridoo.

If you've never heard a didgeridoo, just listen to Paul imitate its sound, because neither of us own a didgeridoo. If you've never seen a didgeridoo, just take a look at the picture above, which, in fact, is a

still<sup>4</sup> from "Arte en las calles", one of the documentary films of my friend, Mikel Tejada. You will see that a didgeridoo is a long wooden cylinder or cone that can be anywhere between 1 and 1.5 metres long. As occurs in all wind instruments, the shorter it is, the higher its pitch. Authentic didgeridoos have been made by the Australian Aborigines for more than 1,000 years. They carefully look for eucalyptus trees that termites have hollowed out<sup>5</sup>. If the hollow is too big or too small, the quality of the didgeridoo will be poor.

To play a didgeridoo, you have to master the circular breathing technique, which basically means that you have to learn how to breathe in and out at the same time. The basic method is as follows:

You fill your lungs with air and begin to blow. Once your lungs are nearly empty, you inflate your cheeks with the last volume of air. Then, while deflating your cheeks to blow out this last bit of air, you very quickly fill your lungs again by inhaling through the nose before running out of air in the mouth. If done correctly, by the time there is almost no more air in the mouth, you can begin to exhale from the lungs once more, ready to repeat the process again.

Interesting, isn't it? Well, those who master the circular breathing technique can spend more than forty minutes playing a single note. Imagine that! Forty minutes! To do such a thing, you probably need strong lungs, a lot of concentration and, of course, hours and hours of practice. But it will be worth the effort, because then you'll become a didgeridoo virtuoso – like Paul! Play it again, Paul!

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<sup>1</sup> Flauta dulce

<sup>2</sup> Flauta travesera

<sup>3</sup> Clave de sol

<sup>4</sup> Plano

<sup>5</sup> Ahuecados