

Didgeridata

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Introduction

This activity guides groups of students through a brief study of the history and construction of either a didgeridoo, the world's oldest wind instrument, or a paixiao, a chinese pan flute. Students will work with polyvinyl chloride (PVC) pipe and PVC-cutting tools to design and create a playable musical instrument which will be used by students to compose a custom song related to climate data such as atmospheric CO₂ concentration or global temperature anomalies. In this way, the sonification of climate data will be accomplished with a student musical chorus. The activity will conclude with a group jam session with participants invited to provide percussion for the wind section. An attempt will be made to have expert musicians join the program via teleconference as a guest speaker to provide instruction and background information.

Chapter 1

Learning Goals and Success

The learning goals for this activity are for students to:

- Develop an awareness of the science and history of the didgeridoo and the paixiao
- Practice hands-on construction methods to create custom, playable PVC musical instruments
- Develop an awareness of long-term trends in climate data
- Create a collaborative musical piece inspired by climate data
- Perform the custom musical piece using the didgeridoo and/or the paixiao

Success will be determined by:

- Creation of playable PVC musical instruments
- Creation and performance of a musical piece inspired directly by trends in global climate data



Figure 1.1: Large Jesse Lethbridge Didgeridoo (4845). Seen at [DidgeridooBreath.com](<https://www.didgeridoobreath.com/Large-Jesse-Lethbridge-Didgeridoo-4845-p/d-575-4845.htm>)

Chapter 2

Didgeridoo

2.1 Overview

The theme of 2019 MIT STEAM Camp is wind and perhaps an exploration of climate data and wind instruments can faithfully incorporate the theme as well as help inform the public about information to which they may not have been exposed. This chapter describes a bit about the didgeridoo, a wind instrument of great significance, and presents instruction for construction of a DIY version that can be created inexpensively and with a high degree of customization.

2.2 History and Significance

The didgeridoo, or yidaki, is an ancient wind instrument believed to have originated among the indigenous people of northern Australia over 40,000 years ago (Harris 2013). This instrument is traditionally used for ceremonial functions and also for recreational and entertainment purposes. Ramin Yazdanpanah is a modern didgeridoo musician who plays with the [Maharajah Flamenco Trio](#), a group that incorporates global sounds into their music.

2.3 Anatomy

A traditional didgeridoo has essentially three components: the mouthpiece, the body, and the bell or flare. The mouthpiece is a small opening usually formed with beeswax. The body is hollowed out, usually by termites. The flare is a natural widening of the body where a trunk or branch meets the ground or larger section of the tree.

2.4 Science

Hopkin (2005) sums up an article by Tarnopolsky et al. (2005) and notes that skilled didgeridoo musicians can adjust their throat anatomy to produce a very wide range of [timbres](#). Fletcher (1996) provides a summary of the physics of this simple instrument.

2.5 Construction

The didgeridoo will be constructed from three PVC components seen in Figure 2.4: a reducing coupling (A), a pipe (B), and a trap adapter (C and D). The length (L) of the pipe is variable and determines the key of the instrument. The mouthpiece is in two pieces. Part D will need to be threaded onto Part C. All other fittings should be pressed on until secure. No adhesives are used in this construction.



Figure 2.1: Ramin Yazdanpanah of the Maharajah Flamenco Trio from the official video for "Dariya." Roughcut Productions, 2017.



Figure 2.2: Mouthpiece detail of a Large Jesse Lethbridge Didgeridoo (4845). Seen at [DidgeridooBreath.com](<https://www.didgeridoobreath.com/Large-Jesse-Lethbridge-Didgeridoo-4845-p/d-575-4845.htm>)



Figure 2.3: Bell detail of a Large Jesse Lethbridge Didgeridoo (4845). Seen at [DidgeridooBreath.com](<https://www.didgeridoobreath.com/Large-Jesse-Lethbridge-Didgeridoo-4845-p/d-575-4845.htm>)

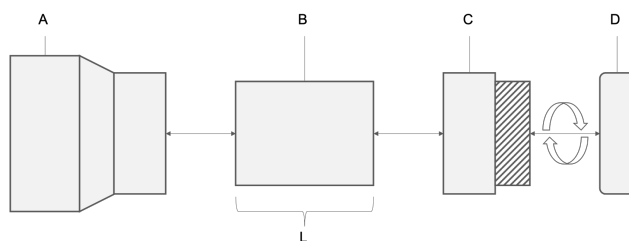


Figure 2.4: PVC didgeridoo construction

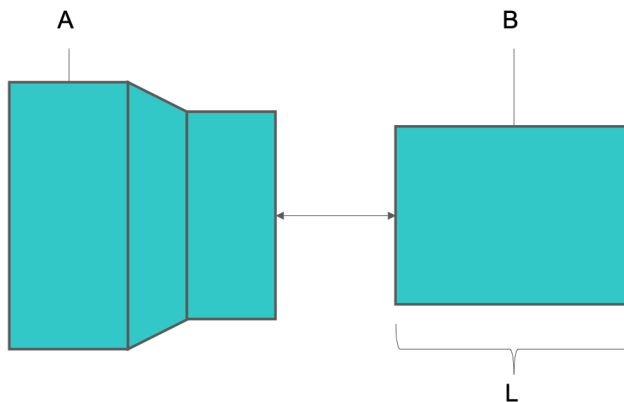


Figure 2.5: PVC didgeridoo construction, part A

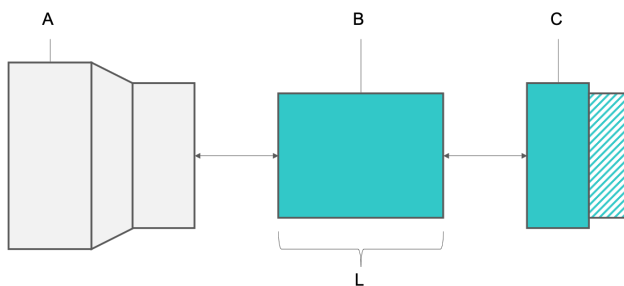


Figure 2.6: PVC didgeridoo construction, part B

To begin, join the reducing coupling (A) to the pipe (B).

Next, join the pipe (B) to the trap adapter base (C).

Finally, join the trap adapter base (C) to the trap adapter nut (D) by carefully threading the nut onto the base.

Your PVC didgeridoo should now be fully assembled. Wipe down the trap adapter with an alcohol pad before attempting to play!

2.6 Standard Form

While traditional hollow-branch didgeridoos are generally straight, the PVC didgeridoo can be created in many forms. The standard straight form is the simplest design with a single length of pipe connecting the

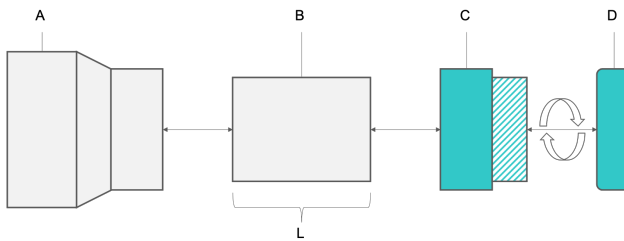


Figure 2.7: PVC didgeridoo construction, part C



Figure 2.8: PVC didgeridoo; standard form

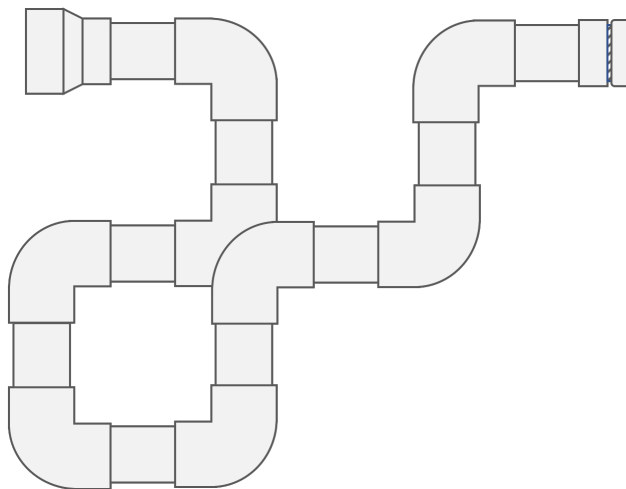


Figure 2.9: PVC didgeridoo; standard form

mouthpiece to the flared bell (our reducing coupling) at the opposite end.

2.7 Alternative Forms

Alternative forms can result in more compact, twisted variations. These forms require extensive cutting and the use of angled fittings. One example is presented here for inspiration. With these forms, students can create longer didgeridoos and deeper, more resonant notes while occupying minimal space. What new form can you create?

2.8 Tuning

According to Didjshop (2016), the length of a didgeridoo for a particular desired frequency (also called the “key” of the didgeridoo) can be found using the formula $l = c/4f$ where l is the length in meters, c is the speed of sound in meters per second, and f is the desired frequency in Hertz (or key). We’ll do our calculations using the metric system so, as an example, let’s find the length of a didgeridoo that will play in the key of E (82.41Hz). We can do this by solving for the equation $l = 344/(4 * 82.41)$. We use 344 m/s because that is the speed of sound in dry air at a temperature of 20 degrees C. Solving this gives us a didgeridoo length of $344/329.64$ or about 1.04 meters. It’s good practice to start with a didgeridoo that is longer than needed and then you can cut and sand the PVC pipe to the desired length and key. See below for a data table of keys, frequencies (Hz), and estimated pipe lengths (mm). To estimate the key for a didgeridoo of a known length, solve the formula for f instead to get $f = c/4l$ where l is again the length of the didgeridoo in meters.

For a PVC didgeridoo, Didjshop (2016) recommends beginners cut their didgeridoo to 104cm for key of E, 118 cm long for a D, or 132 cm long for a C as these are easier keys with which to begin practicing.

2.9 Mouthpiece

The traditional didgeridoo mouthpiece is beeswax. To try this out instead of a plastic fitting, gather a small amount of beeswax, warm it in the sun, microwave (very briefly, ~10 seconds), or oven (very low

Table 2.1: Musical key, frequency, and estimated didgeridoo length.

Key	Frequency (Hz)	Length (mm)
C	32.70	2630
C#	34.65	2482
D	36.71	2342
D#	38.89	2211
E	41.20	2087
F	43.66	1970
F#	46.25	1859
G	49.00	1755
G#	51.91	1657
A	55.00	1564
A#	58.27	1475
B	61.74	1393
C	65.40	1315
C#	69.30	1241
D	73.42	1171
D#	77.78	1106
E	82.41	1044
F	87.31	985
F#	92.50	930
G	98.00	878
G#	103.82	828
A	110.00	782
A#	116.54	771
B	123.47	696
C	130.81	657
C#	138.59	620
D	146.83	586
D#	155.56	553
E	164.81	522

temperatures). You want the wax to be soft enough to mold, but not close to melting. Make a cylinder with a small diameter and then coil the wax around the end of the didgeridoo. Press it gently and mold it to create an opening around 35mm to start. Try it out and keep working it until it feels comfortable.

You can watch this video from Spirit Gallery to watch how they apply beeswax to a didgeridoo: [How to add a Didgeridoo Beeswax Mouthpiece](#).

2.10 Decoration

According to Harris (2013), the didgeridoo may be decorated. Many designs are inspired by nature and traditional pigments contributed an array of earth-tone hues to the instrument. See Figure 2.10 for some examples.

2.11 Play

At the most basic level, the didgeridoo is a very simple tube, traditionally a hollowed-out eucalyptus branch or trunk eaten away from the inside by termites. This wind instrument, also classified as a brass aerophone,



Figure 2.10: Didgeridoo decorations. Photo by Bernard Spragg, NZ. Public Domain.

is deceptively simple however. The physical characteristics of the instrument, paired with the skill of the musician, allow for a wide variety of sounds that may incorporate percussion, vocalization, and intricate droning techniques. For more information on terminology such as resonance, backpressure, and different types of notes, investigate [the information](#) presented by Gallery ([n.d.](#)). These concepts may help students to think of some methods they can try to incorporate into their playing style.

It's a great idea to watch some videos online to hear musicians play different styles, different instruments in a variety of keys, and to hear artists practice as a band. One popular channel on YouTube is [DidgeridooBreath](#).

Here's [a video of Sanshi providing a good intro to the didgeridoo](#):

Sanshi plays a lot of didgeridoo demonstrations to provide customers with an idea of how each instrument sounds. Here's a video entitled "[Ellswood Didge C \(No.2202\) Didgeridoo Demo](#)."

A didgeridoo is featured in "[Dariya](#)" performed here as a Tiny Desk Concert entry by [Maharajah Flamenco Trio](#) from Tallahassee, Florida, USA. Performed by Ramin Yazdanpanah on cajon & didgeridoo, David Cobb on bass, and Silviu Ciulei on guitar.

2.12 Advanced Play: Circular Breathing

If you want to advance your playing, you'll need to learn circular breathing. This technique allows for very long, continuous droning by providing a constant stream of air into the didgeridoo. Didjshop ([2016](#)) provides the following tips for practicing and learning this advanced technique. Essentially, you'll push air that you stored in your mouth out while you breathe in through your nose to replenish the supply in your lungs.

- Breathe in and out of your nose normally. relax
- Fill your mouth with some water and tilt your head back and again breathe in and out of your nose normally. Keep breathing for at least a couple of minutes. relax
- Without water, fill your mouth with air at a fair pressure and keep breathing in and out through your nose for a couple of minutes while keeping the air in the mouth. relax
- Do the same thing again and this time have your thumb and index finger of one hand just touching your cheeks while breathing in and hovering just above the cheeks when breathing out. Relax
- Do the same thing again and this time make the in-breath fast and strong and the out-breath long and constant - still with the fingers and still keeping all the air in while breathing in and out through the nose. Relax
- Do the same thing again and this time after taking a few breath, push your cheeks with your fingers to expel the air out of your mouth while breathing in. Bingo. Relax

Here's Sanshi from the Didgeridoo Dojo giving a brief intro to the technique: [Didgeridoo Circular Breathing: Introduction \(Lesson 1 of 8\)](#)

Chapter 3

Climate Data

3.1 Overview

A wealth of climate change information is available online and students should be encouraged to conduct their own investigations of topics they find interesting. As the theme of this activity is wind, a few NASA resources have been collected for review. Students are expected to draw inspiration from these resources for the purpose of creating a musical piece for performance with their PVC didgeridoo and/or paixiao.

3.2 Data Perceptualization

Quantitative data, in the form of a sea numbers, are usually messy, bloated, and difficult to understand without imposing some kind of order upon them. Humans therefore, tend to take advantage of our exceptional visual-spatial processing capabilities and create colorful visualizations to represent the data in a more meaningful way for easier understanding and communication across groups.

As an example, we can look at a land temperature data visualization presented by Rosenman (2017). In this plot, we see a few notable features. First, the x axis represents each the years 1850 to 2015. The y axis represents the Global Average Temperature in Celcius. Black data points are presented for each year, restricted to only the United States. Each data point is paired with error bars representing uncertainty in that calculated value. We can observe how the uncertainty, or the distance between the maximum and minimum value of the error bars decreases over time. This might be due to our increasing sophistication in measurement tools and perhaps the sheer number of data points collected each year. Another feature we see is the meandering line and blue shaded region. The line represents a smoothed average over time and the blue shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around that average. This line and shaded region are used to provide an idea about a trend in the data set. Hopefully, this type of scatterplot visualization can more easily inform the viewer about any patterns in the data that might be of interest versus the raw data.

Visualization is not the only method for understanding data, however. We may also use a process called sonification (Nees and Walker (2012)) to transform data into sound. This method offers advantages over visualization for recognition of time-based patterns and changes. This is important when dealing with very long time frames on the geologic time scale.

As an example of a sonification of climate data for popular consumption, listen to “134 Years of Global Temperature Change in 14 Seconds” by Nelson Guda (Guda (n.d.)) for [Threshold] (<https://nelsonguda.com/project/threshold/>), a data art project about climate change. In this piece, “the piano notes are the annual temperature data from 1850 – 2015”, and “the orchestra plays chords made of the minimum, mean and maximum temperatures for eight year intervals over that time period.” The data are sourced from The Berkeley Earth Data site (Study (n.d.)).

TODO: expand <https://power.larc.nasa.gov/> <https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>

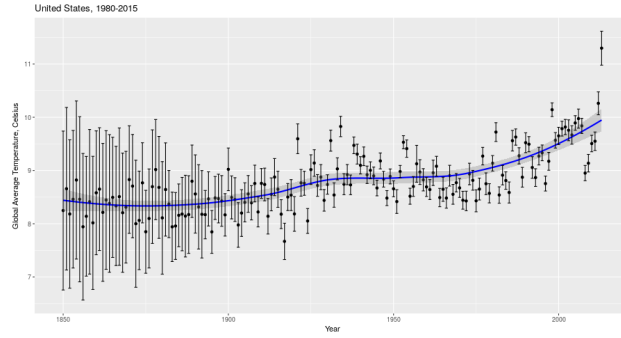


Figure 3.1: Global Average Temperature by Year, United States

3.3 Reading: Fire and Ice

TODO: expand <https://climate.nasa.gov/news/2631/wind-warm-water-revved-up-melting-antarctic-glaciers/>
<https://climate.nasa.gov/news/2791/a-world-on-fire/> <https://climate.nasa.gov/news/2284/airborne-mission-to-focus-on-polar-ice/>

Chapter 4

Music

4.1 Climate Data as Inspiration

Students should look to the suggested climate data resources, or other reputable information, for inspiration to create a musical piece to be performed with their PVC instruments. Students should be allowed maximum creative freedom to interpret their data in musical form but some suggestions include converting wind speed changes into pitch variation, temperature into tempo, or spikes into percussion. Students should brainstorm and work among small teams to document their data source, their method of interpretation, and their data-to-music philosophy.

4.1.1 Documentation

Students may use letter-sized paper or posters to create a document, for public display, that describes their data set and music concept. Students should describe the data, what part(s) of it were used for inspiration, and how they imagined that data as sound.

4.2 Performance

Students will perform in small teams or pairs. A team leader should announce the piece and include a brief informative talk about the data source and how it was used to inspire the musical performance. Student performances should be brief – perhaps 1-3 minutes. Creativity should be rewarded and students may be evaluated with regard to their integration of climate science, instrument construction, and concept development. Acknowledging that students are likely beginners at playing these instruments, students should not be assessed on their actual performance quality. This should be a fun exercise and is meant to inspire students to develop construction skills and foster interest in music and climate science.

Recordings of each performance may be made to document the results of the work. Recordings could be used for publication on social media if desired.

Chapter 5

Materials and Tools List

This chapter describes the materials and tools needed to construct a basic PVC didgeridoo and a basic PVC paixiao.

5.1 PVC Didgeridoo

5.2 PVC Paixiao

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Fletcher, N. 1996. “The Didjeridoo (Didgeridoo).” *Acoustics Australia* 24 (1): 11–15. https://www.acoustics.asn.au/journal/1996/1996_24_1_Fletcher.pdf.

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Study, The Berkeley Earth Surface Temperature. n.d. “Berkeley Earth Data.” berkeleyearth.org. <http://berkeleyearth.org/data/>.

Tarnopolsky, A., N. Fletcher, L. Hollenberg, B. Lange, J. Smith, and J. Wolfe. 2005. “Acoustics: the vocal tract and the sound of a didgeridoo.” *Nature* 436 (7047): 39. <https://doi.org/10.1038/43639a>.

Table 5.1: Materials for constructing a PVC Didgeridoo.

Materials	Specifications (Imperial)	Quantity or Length (Imperial)
PVC pipe	1.5", Schedule 40	10'
PVC trap adapter	1.5", Schedule 40	1
PVC Reducing Coupling	3.0"x1.5", Schedule 40	1
Sandpaper Medium Grit	Medium Grit	as needed
Sandpaper Coarse Grit	Coarse Grit	as needed
Alcohol Prep Pads	-	as needed

Table 5.2: Tools for constructing a PVC Didgeridoo.

Name	Specifications (Imperial)	Quantity (Imperial)
PVC Reamer	> 1.5"	1
Hacksaw	small	1
Digital Tuner	multi-instrument, clip-on or phone app	1
Permanent markers, multicolor	any color	any
Safety glasses	polycarbonate, ANSI Z87.1-2015 or similar	1 pair per student

Table 5.3: Materials for constructing a PVC Paixiao.

Materials	Specifications (Imperial)	Quantity or Length (Imperial)
PVC pipe	1.5", Schedule 40	10'
PVC trap adapter	1.5", Schedule 40	1
PVC Reducing Coupling	3.0"x1.5", Schedule 40	1
Sandpaper Medium Grit	Medium Grit	as needed
Sandpaper Coarse Grit	Coarse Grit	as needed
Alcohol Prep Pads	-	as needed

Table 5.4: Tools for constructing a PVC Paixiao.

Name	Specifications (Imperial)	Quantity (Imperial)
PVC Reamer	> 1.5"	1
Hacksaw	small	1
Digital Tuner	multi-instrument, clip-on or phone app	1
Permanent markers, multicolor	any color	any
Safety glasses	polycarbonate, ANSI Z87.1-2015 or similar	1 pair per student