

Texas Bandmasters Association
Convention/Clinic

July 26-29, 2003

Beginning Flute

Clinician:

Venessa Duran-Sloan

Selecting of Flute Students

I look for students with even teeth whose lips are not too large and who do not have a pronounced under bite. I recommend staying away from the students with a defined teardrop on their upper lip. (This separates the air column, however if the student has a lot of one on one attention success may not be as difficult)

Students may have difficulty achieving much success on the flute if the aforementioned are not followed.

If a student can immediately produce a satisfactory tone on the head joint they may have a natural ability to the instrument. However I am a *firm* believer it is not natural talent but *desire* and *persistence*, which determine future success on any instrument.

Assembly of Instrument

I recommend always making sure the case is properly placed, not upside down, before opening. The next step is noticing how the flute is placed in its case, identifying the parts of the instrument: head joint, middle joint and foot joint and finally identifying the location of the cleaning rod.

- Remove the protective cap from the middle joint and hold it by the end away from the mechanism. (Some instruments will not have protective caps.)
- Take the foot joint by the end below the key mechanism and attach it to the middle joint while gently twisting back and forth. Line up the foot joint so that the rod is exactly centered with the keys on the middle joint.
- Hold the middle joint away from the key mechanism and fasten the two with a twisting motion. Line up the head joint so that the embouchure hole is in a straight-line with the keys on the top of the middle joint.

Common Problems in Assembly

- Head joint does not fit easily into middle joint.*
Sometimes this happens because the head joint and the socket are dirty; simply wipe the head joint and the inside of the middle joint.
- Head joint Alignment*
Many beginners do not align the head joint correctly where the center of the embouchure hole is lined up with the tone holes so I suggest either to scratch lines on the head and middle joints to be certain students alignment are precise each time the instrument is assembled. I prefer a bright nail polish, which is easily removed. If the head joint is not aligned correctly the student will turn in too much or vice versa. This will make holding the instrument more difficult.
- Foot joint Alignment*
Most students will align the rod on the foot joint with the rod on the middle joint. When this happens, the right pinky pushes forward. If the foot joint is turned too far up, the student will place the fingers of the right hand too far over the tone holes in order that the little finger can reach the keys.
- Bending rods and keys.*
Young students put too much pressure on keys or rods when learning to assemble their flute, which bends them out of alignment causing leaks and sluggish movement of keys. Leaks can be hard to correct.

Holding Position For The Flute

- The instrument is held in position through three points of contact with the body: the base of the left forefinger, the right thumb, and the lower lip against the embouchure plate.

- The head is vertical except for a slight tilt to the right, chin up, eyes straight ahead, with shoulders back and relaxed. (I teach vertical at first)
- Elbows are free from the body in a relaxed position.
- Feet flat on the floor
- Shoulders and back shouldn't touch the back of the chair.
- Head is erect, chin is level, eyes straight ahead, and shoulder back and relaxed.
- Remember the alignment of the lips must be parallel with the flute. Always remember to check this with a mirror!

Common Faults in Holding Position

- Head joint downward*- results in poor hand position and a flat tone
- Slouched body* –results in poor breath control and pulls the arms and fingers out of position, making technique difficult and slow
- Arms & Elbows*- the playing position tires the beginner easily and causes the students to hang their arm over the back of a chair.
- Moving the body while playing*- as a beginner moving interrupts tone by changing the position of the embouchure plate on the lips.

Hand Positions

The flute is supported at the base of the left forefinger and the right thumb. It is also balanced with a little pressure of the lip plate against the lower lip.

Left Hand Position

- The body of the flute rests at the base of the index finger between the knuckle and first joint.
- The thumb of the left hand is curved to touch the B-natural lever with the ball of the finger. The rest of the fingers are curved and placed on the keys
- Watch for students using the flesh or fatty part beneath the nail and not the tips of their fingers or underneath the knuckles to cover the holes.
- Remember that the index finger has a large curve.

Right Hand Position

- The body of the flute is rested on the right thumb.
- The right thumb should be placed between the first and second fingers.
- There should be a “U” shape between the thumb and index finger of each hand. (as if holding a sandwich).

Common Faults in Hand and Finger Positions

I don't allow students to attach their mouthpiece to the body until they have mastered their hand position since it slows down development. I constantly check this until the best position for that particular player is established. I also tend to use a large mirror!

Left thumb

Students like to place the thumb too far up on the key, which pulls down the wrist and gives a cramped position

Left pinky

The position for the left pinky is a natural curve, touching but not pressing the G-sharp key. The most common mistake is placing the finger under the key to help hold the instrument.

Right thumb

The body of the flute should rest on the ball of the thumb, which should be between the first and second fingers.

Right pinky

The most common problem is failure to keep the D-sharp key down.

**Sliding left thumb*

I prefer using the 100 400 fingering for B-flat in the beginning stages. Some students develop the habit of using only the thumb B-flat, which makes them slide the thumb from one lever to the other. Uneven technique and incorrect notes are then found. I introduce slide Bb when the students have a greater understanding of the differences.

Embouchure Formation

I recommend using the head joint alone until the student's embouchure is set, which normally take at least one entire six weeks. Don't hesitate if it takes yet another few weeks to master. Find innovative ways to keep the student interested in playing on the head joint. You won't be sorry in the long run!

- Work in front of a mirror!!!
- Hold the head joint with the embouchure hole against the lips.
- Be certain the lip plate is in line with the bottom lip.
- Shape your lips as you would for “u” as in tuba. Some teachers prefer the word “pure” or “poo.”
- Feel with the tongue so that the hole is centered on the lips.
- Blow gently against the opposite edge of the mouthpiece.

In order to keep students interested in the mouthpiece longer I teach them to play Mary Had A Little Lamb with the right pointer finger inserted into the mouthpiece. I also have recorded cool rhythms in 4/4 to play along with. I have even assigned the students to make up their own mouthpiece song!

Common Problems in Embouchure Formation

Direction of the air stream

The air stream coming from the lips must be centered. Move the flute from side to side on the lower lip until this hole is centered. Adjust to the student's lip formation.

Amount of embouchure plate covered by lower lip

Experiment since the exact amount differs from student to student. The lower lip should cover approximately one fourth to one third of the embouchure hole.

First experiment by placing the inner edge of the embouchure hole at the lower edge of the lip on the line where the lip and the chin meet.

More of the hole may be covered by:

- a) Moving the flute down on the lip, or
- b) Rolling the flute in slightly.

Less of the hole will be covered by

- a) Moving the flute up on the lip, or by
- b) Rolling the flute out slightly.

Common problems when blowhole is covered incorrectly

If too little of the hole is covered by the lower lip

- The air stream is not being used correctly
- Tone breathy and just poor
- The range is limited
- Notes in the third octave will be difficult to produce and control.

If too much of the hole is covered by the lower lip

- Small thin tone quality is produced
- Beginners like to do this because it doesn't require much air to produce a tone.

Direction of Air stream

The direction of the air stream determines how much air will go into the instrument and how much into space. The direction is controlled by forward and backward movements of the lips, together with movements of the lower jaw.

I recommend using a device called a pnuemo pro by Blocki Pedagogical Flute Products, especially for the non-flutist beginner teacher. This aids in the student ability to visualizing the air column and the speed of air.

The more downward the air stream

- a) The lower in pitch the flute will respond and
- b) The louder the volume of sound.

The more outward the air stream is directed

- a) The higher in pitch the flute will respond, and
- b) The softer the volume

To change octaves I teach a slight forward and backward movement of the lower jaw and lower lip. This movement of the lips is similar to the movement a brass player uses as he changes pitch.

Breath support

Beginners are infamously short of breath and we all know proper breath support is a necessity on any instrument. Dizziness is a common complaint which occurs when the aperture in the lips are too large or when the air stream is misdirected. Breathing exercises will improve dizzy spells.

- Always breathe in through the mouth, practice yawning.
- When you breathe in, imagine that the air fills your stomach, making it larger like a balloon and never let your shoulders go up
- When you breathe in, imagine you become tall and thin
- Always blow gently into your flute: as if you were warming your fingers on a cold day.
- Lie on your back and place hands on your stomach
- Breathe slowly in through the nose, like smelling a flower
- Feel the stomach slowly rise while the chest doesn't move
- Stand up and relax the shoulders while repeating the exercise
- Breathe slowly through with your mouth open and place your hands against the waist
- Feel the tension under your hands and let the air fill up
- Breathe out slowly and evenly using a sizzle or snake sound.

I also use various combinations of 4 in 4 out, 3 in 6 out, etc. while watching the second hand on a clock. I buy candy and make a contest out of it and have even made a display chart graphing their progress in seconds. Another game we have played is taking a piece of paper and making it stick to the wall with their breath support. We have all sorts of fun doing the most boring of things! Remember, perception is everything! If the kids feel like they're having fun they may not get bored or even notice their actually learning! ☺

Aperture shape and size

It should be roughly a flat oval shape and as small as a coffee stir. I like to tell my students to bring down the tip of their top lip. The exact size of the aperture changes depending on the octave being played; larger for the first octave, smaller for the second octave, and even smaller for the third octave: larger for louder dynamic levels and smaller for softer ones.

Tuning

Basic tuning is made at the head joint-middle joint. If the instrument is being played flat with the head joint all the way in, or being played sharp with the head joint pulled out a lot more than a quarter of an inch, the problem is either the embouchure or the plug in the head joint.

Plug in Head Joint

The cork or plug position is very important for tuning and intonation, and once its position is found it shouldn't be moved. The distance can be checked with the cleaning rod, which has an etched line from one end. To check the distance, place the cleaning rod into the end of the head joint until it is touching the stopper. The line should be exactly in the center of the embouchure hole. If the tuning plug is too far toward the closed end, unscrew the cap on the end, and push the plug into place. If it is too far toward the open end, tighten the cap.

Embouchure and Intonation

Intonation problems can be corrected by the embouchure working along with breath support. The direction of air can be changed slightly to adjust the pitch.

Dynamics

The speed of the air stream controls dynamics. The faster the air is the louder the tone and sharper the pitch will be. When playing a decrescendo the pitch will become flatter and flatter, and in a crescendo the pitch will become sharper and sharper, unless the embouchure compensates. Changing the direction of the air stream does this.

Decrescendo when the air lessens to become softer, the lips should move forward as it raises the direction of the air stream and lower jaw. This directs the air across the hole so the pitch will remain in tact.

Crescendo as the air increases to make the tone louder, the direction of the air stream is gradually changed so that it is directed more and more into the embouchure hole.

Mechanical Factors

Watch for leaky pads, they will cause a note to respond with difficulty and become somewhat sharp in pitch.

Pad Heights are important as well. A pad that is too close to the tone hole usually flattens the pitch, while a pad that is too far above the tone hole sharpens it. All of the pads should be the same distance above their tone holes.

Common Problems in Tone

Small or weak tone

Resulted from poor breathing habits and lack of support. Check to see that the breathing is from the diaphragm and not the chest. If correct the throat might be tight, restricting the flow of air. Work for an open, relaxed throat so that the air can be released.

Hollow tone

The aperture is too large. Use a mirror to correct while pulling down the top tip of the lip while bringing the corners forward. I suggest using a coffee stir to visualize the small aperture in a mirror.

Shrill high register

Too little of the embouchure hole is covered by the lower lip and makes the student blow harshly. Redirect the air stream in a more upward direction for this register

Tonguing / Articulation

Use a mirror to determine that the embouchure formation does not change and that there is no movement of the lips and jaw during articulation.

1. Place the tip of the tongue on the front teeth at the base of the gum
2. With the tongue in place so that no air can pass through the lips, build up air pressure against the tongue the abdominal muscles.
3. Release the air to produce the tone with a movement of the tongue as in pronouncing the syllable “tu, ta, du, or da. The tone should not start with an accent.
4. Stop the tone by stopping the flow of air. Don't place the tongue back on the gum to stop the flow of air.

Common Problems in Articulation

Articulation too heavy

Here the note starts with an accent and is usually caused by too much pressure of the tongue against the teeth and breath. Solution – practice pianissimo articulation.

Movement of the jaw in tonguing

This happens when the student is using the entire tongue. The movement should come from the front part of the tongue. Solution-use a mirror to get rid of all movements.

Harmonics

Harmonics develop flexibility and control of the embouchure and can be played on all notes in the first octave. They are used by making the size of the aperture smaller while the air stream gets faster, and by changing the direction of airflow. They are notated with a small circle above the note. Harmonics are very beneficial to the beginner immediately before the 3rd octave is being introduced.

Vibrato

I first begin teaching vibrato by not informing students of what I'm about to introduce. I begin talking to them about breathing techniques used when women are pregnant. I say he, he, he, and have the kids repeat after me. I have them notice how my tummy moves, not my shoulders. I do it once again with their hand on their bellies

and we repeat. I then make a snake sound and sizzle three times while once again the students repeat. After the giggling has subsided I then have the students reiterate on their mouthpiece and continue this as an exercise. Finally I introduce the word vibrato and play a short excerpt with and one without. If you play a cool song they will all want to copy you!

Conclusion

Students at this age are extremely impressionable. Being prepared is a key ingredient when teaching beginners. If you create various ways to incorporate fun and discipline in your class, students will love learning and be engaged. Creating a positive atmosphere and promoting strong bonds can stimulate and influence a mediocre player to acquire the desire through self-motivation to become a better musician.