

Sound Advice for Saxophone

EMBOUCHURE AND AIR

- **The mouthpiece should be roughly perpendicular to the face**, so that the top teeth will be directly above the bottom teeth. This is different from the clarinet, but will be the same for all the members of the saxophone family.
- **Students should play at the break point** of the mouthpiece to get the most robust sound from their instrument. They can find this by: A) looking at the mouthpiece in profile and placing their thumbnail parallel to the break point before setting their embouchure; or B) sliding cardstock-quality paper between the reed and mouthpiece. You can help students by placing a strip of electrical tape on the mouthpiece directly above the breakpoint; they will slide their upper teeth up the mouthpiece until bumping into the tape.
- Once students are comfortable establishing their embouchure at the break point, you can help them **fine-tune their embouchure placement** based on their tone. For a thin or “fuzzy” tone, have the student slide their top teeth slightly forward. For an edgy or “buzzy” tone, have them slide their top teeth slightly backward.
- The saxophone requires **steady air support and an unchanging embouchure** in order to produce a colorful, stable tone suitable for concert playing. Embouchure pressure should be equally distributed by focusing on keeping the corners drawn in, or forward, and by keeping the abdominal muscles engaged.
- **To help students find their embouchure**, begin by having them rest the weight of their head on the top of the mouthpiece (via the top teeth), keeping the jaw neutral and mouth open. Curling their bottom lip (as if about to say “vooh”), have them make light contact with the reed. Then, have them begin blowing air while drawing the corners forward; eventually the embouchure will seal and they will produce a tone (a good starting note for this is first-finger B in the middle of the staff). Once they understand how much corner pressure is necessary (and how little jaw pressure is necessary), you can have them begin slurring between notes with steady air, and from there develop articulation.
- A handy way to **check embouchure and air support in developing students** is by having them play on the mouthpiece alone. The alto mouthpiece alone should produce a pitch between concert A and B. Higher than this almost always indicates insufficient air support; the student should practice playing a continuous crescendo on the mouthpiece, allowing the pitch to settle as the volume increases. Once the pitch settles into the proper range, the student should attempt to start again at forte with the same, lower pitch.
- **Articulating on the mouthpiece alone** will also be illuminating for students. They should strive first for a legato attack with continuous air support, listening for steadiness of pitch both within and between notes. Unsteadiness within a note usually indicates excessive tongue motion in the articulation; unsteadiness between notes often indicates an unstable embouchure.
- When playing, the **posture should be upright but relaxed**. A common problem involves the elbows: they should be relaxed and close to the body. Remember that the elbows-out marching band posture is good for uniform visuals on the field, but bad for free and unrestricted air flow.

EQUIPMENT

- Most student instruments come packaged with mouthpieces of poor quality, and **a reliable mouthpiece** should be the student’s first priority when purchasing new equipment. A medium length facing and medium-close tip opening is preferred for concert/orchestral playing; most student mouthpieces will feature very wide tip openings and short facings that allow easy initial sounds to be made with a soft reed, but little control of that sound.
- **Reed strength must be matched to the student**, and will slowly change as their embouchure muscles develop and they increase their capacity for air support. Harder does not mean better! A reed too soft for the player will sound buzzy above *mp* and will tend significantly flat in the upper register, while a too-hard reed will respond poorly in the lower register and will tend to be sharp in the upper register.
- Students should begin playing on **high-quality reeds** as soon as they can consistently demonstrate good reed care and maintenance habits.
- Students should always have two to four reeds that they are comfortable playing on; after a reed is used in a practice session or rehearsal, it should get a “day off,” and be allowed to slowly dry while resting on a flat surface (either the plastic sleeve it came in, or a well-designed reed wallet). **Rotating reeds** will significantly extend their life and keep them more reliable, so that students are able to produce their best tone regularly.

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Sound Advice for Clarinet

AIR: The clarinet requires a lot of air speed to sound good. Students tend to let up on air speed in left hand and other less resistant notes. Make sure to remind them to keep air speed high and volume the same level for all notes. Abdominal muscles should always be engaged when blowing through the instrument, with the belly moving natural outward for inhalation and actively inward (belly button towards spine) for exhalation.

Throat tones (G#, A, Bb) will sound better with other fingers down to send the air lower into the tube. Instruct beginners to put the whole right hand down (with pinky on F-C key) for these notes. (Advanced students will learn more sophisticated “resonance” fingerings for these notes later.)

EMBOUCHURE: The muscles of the lips are the primary support of the embouchure. The jaw remains in a neutral position, never moving forward and never pressing upward. The teeth are just open enough to take in the mouthpiece. Bring the lips into a relaxed position around the clarinet akin to sucking one’s thumb where you cup the lips forward rather than drawing the corners back. The lower lip should meet the reed at the point where the clarinet mouthpiece begins to curve away from the reed.

Beginners can start by pressing their thumbs up against the bottom of their top teeth. Have them wrap their lips around the thumb and blow. Next, have students do the same with the mouthpiece and barrel. When they can get a consistent, steady sound, have them blow an open G through the clarinet. The clarinet should be held at a 35° angle from the body: further out for an underbite and closer to the body for a more pronounced overbite. The natural alignment of the upper and lower teeth (jaw position) should always be maintained. Bring the lip muscles inward as if closing a drawstring bag, whistling, or drinking through a straw. Say "oo" with the lips. With these instructions, the chin should flatten naturally.

Have students play simple legato tunes with no repeated notes, so that they learn to keep the air and embouchure the same between notes. Delay teaching articulation until students achieve steady embouchure and air control. Watch that students maintain the same embouchure position throughout the range of the clarinet regardless of articulation or dynamic. Have students use a mirror and videos to check their embouchure position and movement.

To help students who chronically bite (use excess jaw pressure to compensate for lack of proper muscle use in lips), give them a very soft reed. Notes will only speak when the student uses lips muscles with minimal jaw pressure. The great clarinetist Daniel Bonade wrote, “A good reed is designed to be played - not to be squeezed, mauled, and tortured. This is one of the reasons why players with hard embouchures require new reeds after a few days of playing. The player with a flexible embouchure can play a reed several weeks.”

VOICING: (more advanced) For proper tuning, focusing of tone, and a smoother legato (as well as fixing puffed cheeks), say “ee” or “sh” with the tongue. This brings the front of the tongue up to direct the air and increase the air speed. The sides of tongue should be touching the upper molars. This tongue position should be used for the entire range of the clarinet. (Extreme high altissimo notes may require the tongue to move even higher and closer to the reed.)

EQUIPMENT: The **mouthpiece** and reed have more effect on one's sound than the rest of the clarinet, so acquiring an appropriate mouthpiece is essential to one's success as a performer. Stock mouthpieces provided with new clarinets are inferior mouthpieces and should not be used. It is necessary to purchase a quality mouthpiece separately from the clarinet. For younger students or those on a budget, there are a few well-designed plastic mouthpieces that can cost about half the price of a standard hard rubber mouthpiece.

Stick to the tried and tested makes and models of **instruments** and equipment. What’s good advice for cars is good for clarinets – wait until others have had time to test and the manufacturer has worked all the kinks out. Used instruments can be a great option for students; but they need to be in excellent working order, and should be play tested and approved by a reputable clarinetist.

In my experience, there is no such thing as a good student model clarinet **reed**. It is worth the extra price to pay for better reeds. I play custom made cane reeds in my performances, but I often play synthetic Légère Reeds when I am teaching and my office is particularly dry. Synthetic reeds are particularly good for outdoor playing, and they are probably a more appropriate alternative to cane reeds for younger students. I would not hesitate to recommend them to high school clarinetists for rehearsals and performances, since these reeds often play much better than the cane reeds that most players use. Regardless of the material, reeds must be stored in a reed holder and carefully handled.

Besides holding the reed securely on the mouthpiece, a **ligature** should allow the reed to vibrate freely. The best ones do so without contacting the sides of the reed.

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Sound Advice for Oboe

Breathing. A good intake of air is required to start and sustain the tone, but because only a small amount of air actually goes into the instrument, stale de-oxygenated air remains in the lungs while playing. Oboists must learn to *exhale* stale air *before inhaling* fresh air. At the start of a piece in 4/4 time, for example, exhale on beat 3, inhale on beat 4, and play on beat 1. As the player's breathing becomes more efficient, an exhale/inhale cycle may be completed even during a relatively short rest. But where rests are very short or absent altogether, the oboist must *plan* for a place to exhale excess air several beats before the next opportunity to inhale fresh air.

Embouchure. Because tone quality, intonation and articulation are directly influenced by the embouchure, the oboist must develop a *stable supportive embouchure* that allows the reed to vibrate freely. Therefore, the jaws should be *relaxed* with the teeth about ½ inch apart, and the pressure of the lips on the reed should be more *side-to-side* than from above and below (don't smile or bite). Lips vary in size and thickness, so individual embouchures do not look the same.

Easy-to-find *syllables* put the facial muscles in the best position for making a good embouchure:

- “ooo” as in “food” pushes the lips forward
- while the lips are forward, “err” firms the embouchure around the reed
 - corners of the mouth stay *forward and draw inward* like a “drawstring” purse
 - the chin now *flattens* and appears pointed, not rounded or “bunched”
- “mmm” rolls the lips a natural amount over the teeth

Articulation. The tone is begun by releasing the tongue from the reed, not striking the reed with the tongue. Touch the very tip of the reed with the tip of the tongue. This may require keeping the tongue further back in the mouth than one might realize. Tonguing with a “tah” keeps the tongue low and the inside shape of the mouth open for a good combination of clarity and resonance. “Tee” raises the tongue inside the mouth, making the mouth cavity more compact, and is best used for tonguing faster passages. “Dah” softens the low note entrances and helps keep a smooth legato in softer passages.

Intonation adjustments:

To lower a tendency to play sharp, try the following in this order:

- 1) use less embouchure pressure (relax the embouchure)
- 2) open the jaw about ¼ inch
- 3) shift the reed out of the mouth slightly (even a millimeter can make a big difference)

To raise a tendency to play flat, try the following in this order:

- 1) increase the grip of the lips around the reed, but do not “bite” with the teeth
- 2) shift the reed into the mouth slightly (even a millimeter can make a big difference)

Reed. Beginners should start on relatively soft reeds. Try several different brands to see what feels best to the student while producing the qualities you are looking for in the ensemble.

- Soak the reed only 3-4 minutes in warm (never cold) water.
- The reed should “crow” easily around C and respond immediately to articulation.
- The reed will only do so much of the work. Students must understand that it is up to them to discover what combination of air and embouchure makes the reed perform properly.

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Sound Advice for Bassoon

The bassoon's characteristic rich and mellow tone is affected by variables that include (in order of importance) the player's use of air, the embouchure, the reed, the bocal, and the bassoon itself.

Variables associated with the performer:

- **Posture.** Sit at the back of the chair, *not at the front edge*. Put the seat strap across the *front* edge of the chair, which is necessary for the instrument to be in the proper playing position. Bassoon is *angled slightly forward* and *across* the body so that student reads the music to the *right* of the bassoon's body. Head should be *fairly level* and the end of the bocal should be roughly *parallel* to the floor so that student can blow *straight* into the instrument. Reed should be mounted on the bocal in such a way that the head *does not tilt* or put undue pressure on the reed.
- **Embouchure.** Say "ma." The "m" turns the lips in slightly (but mostly *in front of* the teeth) while the "ah" opens the jaws and relaxes the throat. Create a seal *around* the reed with the lips, but *do not bite!* An underbite can make a proper embouchure difficult to form.
- **Amount of reed in the mouth.** If too little of the reed is in the mouth, the tone will be flat and buzzy. If too much reed is in the mouth, there may be a loss of control. The best position is to put the lips where the freest "crow" is achieved on the reed alone.
- **Air.** Air that moves too slowly will cause the second-space C to fall about a half-step flat with a flabby tone. Speeding up the air (usually by engaging the abdominal muscles) will cause the C to "hop" up to the correct pitch, and the tone will improve dramatically.
- **Fingers.** If a finger does not properly cover its holes, air leakage can cause stuffiness or pitch problems (especially a problem for the first and third fingers of the left hand).

Variables associated with the reed:

- The reed must be *soaked* for about a minute in warm water prior to playing. If too dry, it won't vibrate and can easily be cracked. If too wet, it may play flat with an unfocused sound.
- The ideal *opening* of the reed is 1-1.5 millimeters. If the reed is too open, the player will need to bite on it to get the blades close enough to each other for the reed to "work" at all, and the pitch will go sharp. If the reed is too closed, the tone will be flat, small, and thin.
- If the *reed is too hard*, it will resist vibrating, buzz, and will need a narrower opening, so the player will probably bite, driving the pitch up.
- If the *reed is too soft*, it will sound tubby and play flat, sometimes even dropping dramatically on the E or C# below middle C; shorten the tip a small amount (less than a millimeter) to fix this.

Variables associated with the instrument:

- Bocals are made in *various lengths*, but replacing a standard #2 bocal with a #3 flattens the pitch by less than what is needed for the routine lowering of the third in a major chord (14 cents). In other words, a player's *normal* flexibility in pitch will be greater than the result you get with the next longer bocal. Excessively high or low pitch is most likely a reed or embouchure problem.
- A *leaky bocal* (due to a crack in the metal or a loose whisper vent) will make the tone stuffy.
- A *leaky pad* will cause stuffiness in the tone; may also cause sharper pitch. A missing pad may prevent all lower notes from sounding.
- A *leaky U-tube* in the boot can wipe out the low register. Remove the boot cap and tighten fastening screws if loose. Any other re-sealing of the U-tube should be done professionally.
- *Foreign objects* (swabs, paper wads, etc.) stuck in a joint can cause the low range to end abruptly. Stuck swabs are best removed by a professional to avoid irreparably damaging the bassoon.

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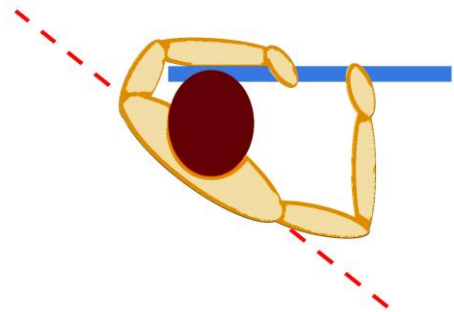
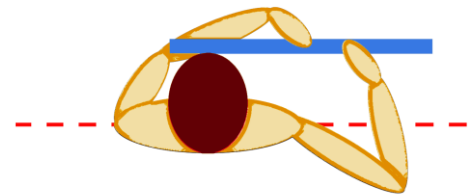
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Sound Advice for Flute

- **The flute is like a cat.** You can't force it to do anything it doesn't want to do and it's a mistake to try. Cats (and flutes) make good companions *only* when we accept this.
- **How we blow is much less important than how we resonate.** The flute is quiet by nature. Flutists rely on vocal resonance to make it audible. Anything that would interfere with a singing voice is equally detrimental to our sound production.
- **There is nothing natural about holding an instrument out to the side.** Still, can approach it in a comfortable and relaxed manner. An unnatural instrument requires a somewhat "unnatural" approach.

Body Orientation –Flutists should not look where they're going!

- **Straight and narrow.** This may work for others, but facing straight ahead puts the flutists shoulders *parallel* to the flute. The left hand can barely reach and the right arm must be folded behind the shoulder. The neck, ribcage, shoulders, elbows, wrists and hands all contort. Over time, serious discomfort and injury are almost inevitable. Happily, there is a simple alternative.
- **Cracked and wide.** Rotating the body 45 degrees to the right instantly improves sound production, breathing, finger technique and overall endurance. When standing, most professionals put the left foot forward and most weight on the right foot. When sitting, the chair should be turned 45 degrees to the right. Some weight should remain on the feet (this helps with breathing and prevents slouching).



Posture and Body Language

- a. When we feel confident, the head sits loosely above the shoulders, which are held slightly back. If you drop your hands to the side, the palms will face to the front. With the sternum raised, breathing is effortless and the fingers fall naturally onto the keys. This is how we (and the flute) function best, but it cannot be forced. In a perfect world we would all function this way, but confidence can be elusive, especially for students. Ironically, trying to "appear" confident usually results in unwanted tension and effort.
- b. When stressed, we initiate a *startle reflex*. This defensive action begins with pulling the head down and usually ends with the shoulders rolled forward – it can progress to a fetal position. This protects the body and makes a smaller target (if attacked by a bear). It is also very effective for signaling lack of social status (i.e. worthlessness). The wasted *effort* involved is particularly harmful to flute playing. Were this not enough, the harder a student tries, the worse things become. Once established, the pattern is difficult to remedy. Making an issue of posture usually backfires, with the student become even more self-conscious. There are no easy answers, but it helps to realize that posture is related to personal security and self esteem. Alexander Technique is the best known remedy and while effective, it requires time, commitment; and may be expensive.

Steady the flute, but please don't grip! Marcel Moyse said "the flute is like a fish." With the mouthpiece merely sitting on the chin, bouncing is common and disastrous for tone. We must somehow immobilize the instrument without immobilizing the fingers. By isolating three points of support the fingers are left free to do their job without interference.

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1. **The right thumb pushes against the back of the tube**, thus leaving the fingers free. *Avoid lifting from below.* William Kincaid said to “brush up” to the chin. Styles have changed, but this is still important advice. If you the foot lifts, the headjoint will pull down. Another common error is to place the right thumb on the far side of the flute. Aside from cramping the fingers, the flute will try to roll toward the player and, (guess what?) pull down on the lip.
2. **The left index finger (first joint) presses the side of the flute up and into the chin.** It should not lift from below. The flute should sit near the top of the first joint of the index finger, which remains nearly vertical (see fig. 3 below). *This can be difficult to teach*, but allowing the joint to collapse under the flute (fig. 1) hinders both finger technique and sound production. The other joints (and other fingers) remain free. *Never* support the flute with the left thumb.
3. **The chin should be relaxed** and slightly tucked under. It won't fall off, so when raising the flute to play, don't bring the chin out to meet the mouthpiece. Instead, bring the flute all the way up and let it push the chin under.

Curved Fingers are good. Hand problems usually originate at the shoulders and straight ring fingers are a red flag. Pulling the shoulders forward rotates the arms inward, pulling the ring fingers away from the instrument. With the recommended 45-degree body rotation and *relaxed* shoulders, all fingers can comfortably reach the keys (with all but the smallest students). This approach also puts the little finger much closer to the footjoint keys and allows the LF little finger to easily reach the G key. The left thumb should touch the key at the base of the pad (near the first joint -fig. 3). Never use the tip of the left thumb, as this pushes the wrist out and causes the flute to pull down on (surprise) – the lower lip.



Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the hand position which results from hunched shoulders. Both hands are rolled inwards and fingers highly angled (note straight RH-little finger). Figures 3 and 4 show hand position with shoulders down and held very slightly back. Note that in fig. 4 the little finger is curved.

Let the flute droop! Flutes are *designed* to work at an angle - really. Flute makers go to a lot of trouble to leave a water channel so that water drains away from the pads. Holding the flute at full horizontal causes water to accumulate and run out the toneholes. Once this happens, the pads will attract moisture and stick. For the player, full horizontal causes unpleasant stress in the neck and shoulders. A small tilt (about 15 degrees) of both flute and head relieves this and improve sound considerably. If the slight droop looks relaxed, that's the point!

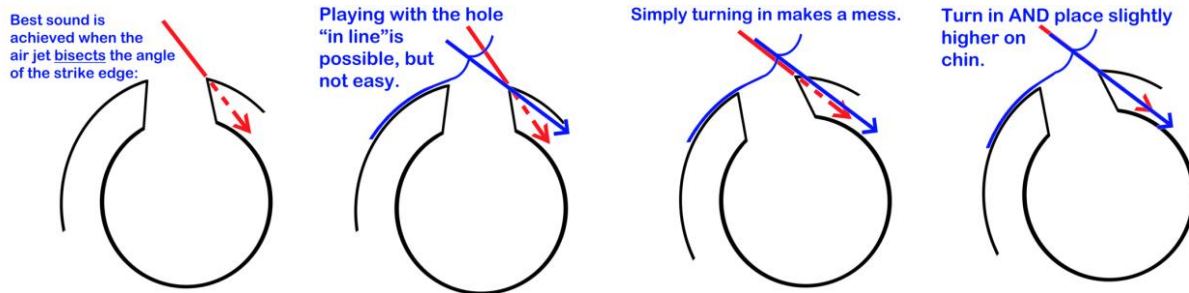
Sound Production.

Avoid extremes. Getting a good sound on flute is not difficult. It requires finding the simplest and most reliable solutions to a few universal problems. My best advice is this: If you practice (sufficiently) and don't get the desired result, the technique is faulty. Practicing more (or harder) won't help. *Instead, change the technique.* For example, if you play with tight lips, you will be sharp. If you then pull the head out, you will *always* play tight. It is better to set the flute up in a neutral position and find a way to play with a neutral embouchure. This makes playing easier and gives you the most flexibility.

If you would like detailed exercises (and explanations), just send an email to: espell@email.wcu.edu

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Turn the headjoint in - please! Putting the head joint on center makes playing unnecessarily difficult. I know because I played this way for 20+ years). Let's look at the angle of air leaving the lips and the angle *required* by the mouthpiece. For most people, they coincide only with the head turned in. I can say *with some authority* that the scale of modern flutes is designed to work best with this approach.



Warning - turning in alone will lower the pitch - drastically. It is essential to also **move the flute up slightly on the chin**. This will raise the pitch and allow you to play with a shorter (and more efficient) air jet. Perhaps surprisingly, the sound will be louder. And, articulation, intonation, and breath control become easier. The only downside is that that greater precision is required from the player.

Intonation is tone (and vice versa). Get the octaves in tune!

News flash: Rolling the flute, tilting your head, and blowing faster/slower have very little effect on pitch. They do change embouchure coverage and that changes the pitch. So, learn pitch control at the source.

- **Pitchbending** – independent control of the lower lip makes pitch control direct and easy. Start with the face relaxed and lips in a neutral position. To lower pitch, stick the lower lip out (like you're pouting). To raise pitch, pull the lower lip tight (tight embouchures play sharp!). If pitch is consistently high, move flute lower on chin. If pitch is *consistently* low, move it up. A neutral position gives the widest range of pitch. With practice, it is *easy* to raise a middle-register note ¼-step or lower it a major third. To practice: 1) begin as sharp as possible, 2) sweep quickly down, 3) then come back to the center. In doing this, you are trying all the possible embouchures and stopping with the one that sounds best.
- **Descending octaves** - The worst approach is to slow the air and tighten the lips. It is hard work and the tone will be unfocused. A better way is to maintain (or *increase*) air speed and simply lower the angle of the air jet. This is easier and sounds better. To learn this:
 - First, play a middle-register note with *maximum* airspeed (and relaxed embouchure). With the note about to crack, lower the airstream *slightly*. You may be surprised to learn that a note can crack *downward*.
 - Step two is to *smear* the octave downward. If you can do this, the octaves are in tune. If there is a bump between notes, your coverage of the embouchure hole is incorrect. Don't move the lips, move the headjoint up or down on the chin until the octaves do smear. Don't worry about being in tune with anyone else - yet. The goal is to find a neutral position that gives in tune octaves.
 - Once the octaves are consistently in tune *with each other* (and you have found a stable position on the chin), *then* it is appropriate to pull out or push in the headjoint to play in tune with the rest of the world..

Tapered note endings– Very few flute students can end a note tastefully, so this deserves your attention. You could squeeze to make the sound smaller, but this is difficult and unnecessary. Instead, blow normally and, with air at full velocity, raise the air jet until no sound is heard. There may be a bit of

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sizzle, but the audience won't hear it. *It is easiest to learn this backwards.* Blow so high that no sound is heard and *slowly* lower the air until the sound begins. If this happens abruptly, practice until you can sneak in from nothing. Once this is comfortable, just reverse the process to make a tapered note ending. This technique works in all registers and is particularly helpful in the third octave.

Beyond the basics

- **Vibrato.** Professionals don't use constant vibrato and neither should students. Please don't press students to learn vibrato until other aspects of sound production are fully accomplished.. Starting this too soon (or without proper instruction) leads to very bad habits. If students can't study with a professional flutist, have them listen to recordings of several *different* established players. Some think vibrato speed should be "natural," but working flutists need complete control. Practice with a metronome at different speeds and in different groupings - especially fives and sevens (these tend to sound less mechanical than threes and fours). The current trend is towards a fast vibrato, but never a "nanny goat." Flute vibrato is mostly about changing loudness, but does alter pitch. Listeners are more sensitive to flatness, and a good vibrato avoids this by *adding* to the sound (more than subtracting). This has little effect on pitch and doesn't catch the ear. A subtractive vibrato reduces air and lowers pitch (picture a car trying to start). Good vibrato is subtle. I often hear something like the heart of an elephant beating in the body of a sparrow. Violinists vibrate *before* the notes starts. We can't do that, but good vibrato begins *with* the note, never *after*. It is tempting (and criminal) to start straight and add vibrato as part of a swell. This deadly mannerism will get you fired from most orchestras. Styles are always changing, so it pays to listen to many, many recordings.
- **Vocal matching.** 1) Play a simple phrase. 2) Now, sing it and notice your internal movements. 3) play it again - while making those same movements. You don't have to sing well or even be in tune. The before/after difference should be obvious.
- **Shadow and light.** Besides vocal matching, the choice of vowel has a direct influence on tone quality. Further, (and like voice) we can selectively reinforce the lower components of the sound through chest resonance and the upper components through the face. It pays to experiment. If you are too shy to sing, simply flaring the nostrils can make a substantial improvement.
- **Whispered "ah."** Exhale slowly through an open mouth. This yoga technique can help a student learn to blow without creating artificial resistance.
- **Articulate with air.** Practice starting notes cleanly, without using the tongue.
- **Scales.** The tuning of flutes has improved enormously in the past three decades. By comparison, "old scale" flutes can be difficult to play and encourage embouchure tension. Up-to-date instruments are a must.
- **Headjoint design** – Developments parallel those of flute scales. Older headjoints may seem stuffy, while recent heads play much more easily. This is good, up to a point. Beware heads that play too easily. They may sound good at ff, but that's all. They can be quite inflexible.
- **Embouchure** – It's just a hole you blow air through and detailed explanations tend to lead students astray. If you feel compelled to say something, the French "Tu," (starting with the tip of the tongue between the lips) gives good results. The student forms the opening around the tip of the tongue (like drinking through a straw. A wide variety of articulation is available by varying the timing. If you blow and then retract the tongue, there will be a small explosion. If you retract the tongue and the blow, a lovely soft entrance results – in all registers. .

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