

The General Care of the Flute, Part 2

by Martin Greene

The flute is a very well thought out instrument, and not much can damage it during play. Nevertheless there are certain considerations to be heeded if it is desired to keep the instrument in top condition. Some serious damage can occur during assembly. There are two actions required for assembly, (1) connection of the headjoint to the body, and (2) connection of the body to the foot.

Since no lubrication is used, and no cork is present, the headjoint - body - foot connections are all metal-to-metal. Therefore, it is important to assemble the flute with more care than is used with other woodwinds.

Begin by inserting the head joint (tenon) into the body (socket). Grasp the headjoint carefully but firmly, holding it vertically, and line it up with the body (also held vertically). Do not hold the body anywhere there is mechanism. Hold it at the area of the socket, where its wall has been thickened for strength.

One of the most common faults is to grasp the flute body near its middle, with fingers around the mechanism; a frequent result is deformation of the long rods which control the two high trill keys. This assembly has an inherent weakness, in that one very thin rod passes through the center of the other, thicker rod. If it is bent even slightly, binding will occur, which affects one or both trill keys.

Look carefully at the line-up of the headjoint and body, and then carefully and slowly insert the headjoint into the socket. Do not allow it to come out of line, nor wiggle it back and forth in an attempt to make it fit. This will in a short time deform the socket into a subtle "cone" shape which makes for a loose headjoint.

Try to insert it with as little side to side motion as possible, with a slight rotation as it is inserted into the socket. The next step is to attach the foot to the body. The same technique is used, but unfortunately it is almost impossible not to grasp the foot over its mechanism. Since it must be held that way, try to distribute pressure all over the mechanism of the foot, especially on the larger rod (not the keys themselves).

Continue to hold the body by the socket, while attaching the foot. After it is completely on the body, line up the large rod of the foot with the center of the lowest pad (key) of the body. Finally, go back to the headjoint, and, holding the fully assembled flute horizontally, and looking at it down its length, line up the embouchure hole with the main line of the keywork.

Before playing, it is a good idea to brush your teeth whether you've eaten recently or not, and rinse well. Toothpaste, imperceptible to you, can be blown out in tiny quantities and affect the interior of the embouchure hole. The same substance which is responsible for formation of plaque on your teeth, can be blown out and onto the flute's chimney (interior of riser). It is just as permanent there, as it would be on your teeth — but dentists don't usually try to clean embouchure holes! So prevention is essential. It goes without saying that food of any kind, and all drinks except water, are to be avoided while playing. Sugary drinks are death to pads.

During play, remember that the flute often seems shorter than it really is. Don't bang it into the head of the musician next to you, the music stand or anything else! Grasp it dexteriously, firmly but gently. An overly strong grip is enough to deform the body (of a thinwall flute) and/or keywork.

During pauses, put it in your lap, and if you must set it down, try to use a flute stand. Get one which is designed not to scratch the flute's interior surface (i.e. one made of wood, or if metal, covered with soft plastic on the rod).

Never put the instrument on the lip of a music stand, nor on a chair, nor leaned up against anything. Be aware of the presence of pets or small children, for whom curiosity is constant and shiny objects are irresistible.