

Ten Tips for Flute Players

by Mimi Stillman

Throughout my experiences teaching masterclasses to flutists of all ages and levels - from nine years old to high school, college, graduate school, and adult, I keep returning to fundamental points about flute playing. These points form the basis of my Ten Hot Tips. Some tips deal with technical, nuts-and-bolts aspects of playing, while others pertain to musical expression and interpretation. I'd like to share with you some of the advice I give most often to my students. I hope you enjoy using these tips when you play.

Music is a skill, like sports, math and learning a foreign language, so consistency in your practicing is the key to improvement. It is better to practice for one hour every day than to save up several hours of playing for one day. The principle is the same whether you're a beginner who practices for one half-hour a day, or a more experienced player who practices 2-5 hours a day.

Tip #1 - Breath support: The most basic piece of advice I give to a flutist is about breath support. Breath support comes from breathing deeply from the diaphragm and maintaining a pressurized stream of air. Have someone punch you (not too hard!) in the stomach while you are playing. If your stomach muscles are soft, you're probably not supporting the sound. Take a deep breath and feel your abdominal area expanding first, then your upper chest. Combine this feeling with fast air speed and your sound will grow stronger, rounder, and project better.

Tip #2 - Posture: Good posture is just as crucial as breath support in creating a strong, round sound. Imagine yourself as a singer standing tall with chest expanded, poised to fill a hall with sound. Because for flutists as well as for singers air is the most important part of playing, you want your lungs to be able to expand to their full capacity. That means don't hunch over or slouch, but stand naturally when you play.

Tip #3 - Hand position: I look at a flutist's hand position to spot problems and try to prevent the tension-induced injuries that some musicians develop. In order to reach a natural and relaxed hand and arm position, play your flute in front of a mirror and observe your arms and hands. If your wrists are bent, you might experience pain in your wrists and hands. Remedy this by putting down your flute and looking at your hands in their relaxed position at your sides. Notice how your wrists are straight when they hang at your sides. Pick up your flute one arm at a time, retaining the naturally straight position of your wrists.

Tip #4 - Shrugging shoulders: Play standing again in front of a mirror, this time looking at your shoulders. Do you raise your shoulders when you breathe and play? If you do, this creates tension, reduces lung capacity, and is a sign that you are not breathing from your diaphragm. While continuing to play in front of a mirror, make sure to breathe deeply from your diaphragm while keeping your shoulders in their natural position.

Tip #5 - Open throat: Playing with an open throat will produce an open, larger sound. Conversely, a closed throat will produce a pinched and small sound. While yawning, feel your throat expanding, allowing air to pass more freely in and out of your mouth. Keep this yawning feeling while you play and listen for the improvement in your sound.

Tip #6 - Slow practice: If you can play a passage evenly at a slow tempo, then you can play it fast. Slow practice of fast passages enables us to surmount technical challenges, just as practicing lyrical music slowly pushes our breath control to the max. Set your metronome at a slow tempo and play through a difficult passage, repeating it one notch faster until you reach your goal tempo.

Tip #7 - Metronome and tuner: I don't leave home without these companions! Solid rhythm and pitch are the basic components of making music, necessary to all the playing you'll do by yourself, in chamber ensembles, and in an orchestra. See Tip #6 for a method of practicing with the metronome. Play slow passages with your tuner, always listening carefully to hear which notes are out of tune - that is, sharp or flat. Always bring your metronome and tuner to ensemble rehearsals in case you need to check tempos or intonation.

Tip #8 - First and last notes of phrases: The first and last notes of phrases must be beautiful and in keeping with the character of the music. First notes set the tone for the phrase, so you don't want to start a calm phrase with a hard attack or an emphatic phrase with a weak attack. As you play, listen carefully to the way you end your phrases, and avoid cutting a note too short before a breath, or ending a lyrical phrase abruptly. You will be better able to capture the particular expression of a given piece, resulting in a more polished musical interpretation.

Tip #9 – Listen: Expose yourself to new repertoire and performers by listening to a wide variety of music for different instruments and combinations. The more you listen, the more musical ideas you will have to call upon in your own playing. For example, flutists can learn a lot from listening to the way singers breathe and phrase.

Tip #10 – Express the music: Every piece you play has a unique character and mood, and whether it is programme music - music that tells a story - or not, your job as performer is to bring out the character of the piece. The freedom to express is aided by memorization of the music. Use your imagination to guide your musical expression. And most of all, enjoy what you are doing. Bringing music to others is the most thrilling experience for a musician.