

One Size Does Not Fit All

Claire Johnson

My subject, one size does not fit all, is a response to the many times a band director asks a simple question. There are no simple answers to seemingly simple questions. Each student's physical body, physical brain and mind are totally individual. Every teacher's physical body, physical brain and mind are also individual. Therefore, every aspect of flute playing and flute teaching must be examined, understood and taught with openness and experimentation, knowing that it is impossible to know everything.

Holding or balancing the flute is extremely awkward, especially for small bodies, children or sixth graders who are still learning to balance themselves. The key word is balance. The flute is a balanced instrument held sideways and toward the front.

The player's head, weighing eight to ten pounds is key to proper body balance. Young students are taught in beginning lessons to turn their heads slowly to the left and then to the right, while keeping the eyes looking straight ahead. The students are then taught to tilt their heads toward their left shoulder and then toward their right shoulder, never allowing the head to fall forward. This simple exercise helps the student to feel a balanced head. The flute is a front instrument,

not a side instrument. It is played almost to the front of the body. Most flutists do not hold their instruments horizontally, except in marching band, because of arm weight, shoulder, neck and back tension. Arm bones are very heavy, especially the ulna bone: the bone in line with the pinky. Arms and elbows are relaxed, working with gravity rather than against it.

Arms and hands, along with the rest of the body, work together to balance the flute. The two most common left hand positions are bent wrist and straight wrist. Bent wrist involves the back of the left hand perpendicular to the flute, first finger wrapped around the flute, thumb vertical and pinky curved. The fingers should be curved and the flute is supported from below. Straight wrist involves arm and knuckles being somewhat in line with the thumb and not vertical. This is a very general explanation. The right hand has many variations, particularly in the placement of the thumb. Some place the thumb under the first trill key, some to the

right of the index finger. All seem to agree that the thumb is on its side and that the right hand pinky should be curved and for strength on its left side. The size of the hand and length of the fingers will determine the thumb's placement.

There are as many opinions on the embouchure as there are flute teachers. Generally it is agreed, I think, that the bottom

lip should be across the flute plate, aiming air across, while the upper lip aims the air downward. The aperture is a symmetrical, elliptical opening, efficiently focusing the air stream. Some players like tight corners, some like firm corners, some like flexible corners. The consensus is: lips must be supple. Beautiful sound must be the guiding principle. There are a myriad of variations to add color to the sound; air in cheeks, tongue shape and placement, soft palate high, soft palate wide, change in air speed and direction. The ideas go on and on. Listen and experiment. The jaw must be relaxed. Drop the jaw like an elevator. Place an almond in your mouth between

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the upper and lower back teeth. This will give you the feeling of openness. The tongue, a huge strong muscle, must be relaxed and forward. Do not allow the tongue to arch in the back of the mouth. There must be a steady connection between the flute plate and chin, but not pressure against the jaw for the young player.

Articulation is the speech of music. It takes a long time to achieve clear, clean, beautiful tonguing,



and, what a surprise, there are many correct ways to tongue, depending on the individual's tongue and what is musically and stylistically required. The tongue reacts to air. Therefore, air pressure behind the tongue is imperative. There are many positions the tongue can take for articulation. The tongue can strike between the lips, between the teeth, behind the upper teeth, where the upper teeth and gum meet and on the upper palate. The more forward the tongue, the quicker the sound response, but tonguing behind the teeth allows for faster speed. Problems with tonguing occur if the muscle is held too tightly or if the tongue movement is too large. Students can practice biting on the sides of the tongue, holding the back sides of the tongue still, and moving just the tip of the tongue up and down to help refine the tongue muscle. Double tonguing should be taught very early, as soon as the student can single tongue. Flutter tonguing is fun and solves tone problems as well as articulation problems.

Vibrato seems to be the huge mystery. Before teaching vibrato, please insist that the student listen

to recordings of classical flutists, vocalists and string players so that aural concepts begin to develop. When the abilities to breathe fully and to play with a controlled, steady tone are developed, the student is ready to vibrate the tone. Often the vibrato just happens through imitation. Often it has to be taught. A successful method is to teach abdomen pulses, but explain that the actual pulse occurs in the glottis or the "cough muscle". Put one hand on the stomach area between your ribs and the other hand on the throat, finding the "cough area". Cough gently and you will observe that these muscles move sympathetically. You cannot cough without engaging abdomen muscles and you cannot cough without engaging the cough or glottis muscle. Simply say "eh eh eh", and you will feel the glottis opening and closing. When vibrating, the glottis partially closes and opens, producing a vibrating air stream which results in a beautiful vibrato. When playing low notes, one usually plays with a slow vibrato while high notes are played with a faster vibrato. Vibrato can be narrow or wide, depending on the music and the performer's choice.

Although breathing should be the first subject to be discussed, because all wind playing depends upon it, I choose to discuss it last, for no valid reason. Breathing is easy! Inhale and exhale without obstruction! What causes obstruction? The main causes are poor body balance, (I don't like the word, posture—it is a static word), tight muscles, closed glottis, tight tongue or tight lips. While sitting or standing with attention to your complete body balance, especially your head, inhale. The diaphragm muscle will naturally pull the air in. When you exhale, the intercostal muscles along with help from the abdomen muscles will push the air out. The diaphragm, a flat, fibrous muscle, attached to the tenth rib, goes through your body and attaches to your lower spine. It pulls the air in and one feels expansion as the intercostal muscles stretch and the

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lungs fill with air. The diaphragm then relaxes and the intercostal muscles and abdomen muscles push the air out. The spine gathers on inhalation and lengthens on exhalation. Upon inhalation one feels the rib cage expanding. Pay special attention to the greater expansion in the back. Some young students think the lungs are mostly in the front. Remember, breathing is natural. The information in the above paragraph is general and will not get you into medical school. It is from a flute player's point of view and understanding.

I would like to say “thank you” to all music directors, no matter what level you teach. Your job is incredibly difficult, but the service you are bringing, the awareness you are building and the beauty you are introducing to young people will never be understood by those on the “outside”.

Music Pedagogy: A Complexity Which Denies Its Beauty

The Flute

by Claire Johnson

An instrument so ergonomically wrong
To physically play, one is agile and strong
Hands—one under—one over, are held to the right
The fingers, all eight of them, are way out of sight

A pipe, held horizontally, and full of holes
Blow across, just right, and out beauty rolls
Producing a sound so mysteriously blue
A warm, lovely, vibrating, hovering hue
A sound so cool and magically soft
Swirling and curling carries your spirit aloft

Move a miniscule muscle with a plan to play high
The sound will change and energy will fly
Being beautiful or piercing, depending on skill
Developing that skill depends on your will
To master and produce a lovely round sound
Being an ambassador of beauty
brings love all around

Love of Beauty
Beauty Demands Awareness
Beauty is Not Simple

Claire Gruneis Johnson was born on August 7, 1930 in New Haven, Connecticut. The New York Times headline read “Depression Deepens, Two Million People Unemployed”. Worse than that, Claire was the third daughter born to German immigrants, Emma und Emil Gruneis.

Claire's early music studies were at the Neighborhood House Music School with her sisters and she started playing flute when she was eleven years old. She and her sisters were known as the Gruneis Trio and were mentioned in the book “They who Speak in Music,” a history of the Neighborhood House Music School. After completing high school, where she won all the usual music awards, Claire entered the Julliard School of Music where she studied with Arthur Lora, then principle of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Claire met and married a young tenor, who upon graduation joined the Navy. Life took the family to Texas where she gave birth to her fifth child. Not the stay-at-home type mom and needing to escape back into her profession, she resumed her pedagogical career. Claire contacted Eddie Green, re-remembered all her musical information and resumed her career at Lake Highlands.

Eugene Bonelli, Dean of Fine Arts at SMU invited her to teach there and she did so for 32 years. She also taught at East Texas State University. Then, at the age of sixty-five, Claire joined the faculty at the University of Houston. Active in the flute community, she has lectured at NFA, TBA and TMEA. Claire founded the Texas Flute Festival, the Myrna Brown Competition and Floot Fire, a weeklong flute camp for junior high and high school students. Claire retired from university teaching in 2000 and maintains a private studio in Richardson.