Practice Tips for Learning Texas All-State Etudes

Dr. Christina Guenther

NOTE: While Dr. Guenther offers these tips to aspiring All-State flute students, I believe much of this advice is applicable to other instrumentalists as they begin the process of learning their audition music. Feel free to share this information with your students. Best wishes to all as you begin the All-State audition process for next year!

—Mike Brashear, editor

As we approach another summer and the impending release of the Texas All-State etudes, this article presents tips to help in the learning and preparation of these works for contest. Any of this information is also useful for practicing works of music in general.

The earlier one can get started on practicing these etudes, the better. The time of release of the etudes to the first round of contest is substantial, and much progress can be made to perfect them technically and play them musically. Do not delay beginning your work on these etudes. Even with marching band season in full swing, you can still spend a little bit of time each day to work on sections of this music. A little regular practice over an extended period of time will go a long way. Before beginning to learn the etudes, however, it is incredibly helpful for students to have a firm grasp on the fundamentals; learn your scales in all forms and learn their related chords and thirds. Be able to do your scales and chords with any articulation. Any scale patterns you know will significantly increase the speed at which you can learn and master these etudes. Remember—the stronger your technique is, the better you can sight read; the better you can sight read, the faster you can learn music.

Texas All-State etudes are generally divided into two categories—technical (fast) and lyrical (slow). The point of the technical etudes is to play them as cleanly as possible as close to the given goal tempo as possible. This does not mean that musicality should not be part of the equation—it should be! When asked what is the point of the slower etudes, most students will say "tone and musicality". Of course, this is true; however, what is often overlooked is that the slow etudes are all about rhythm. Without rhythmic accuracy, it does not matter how beautiful your tone is—you must play those beautiful notes at the right time.

Technical Etudes

In beginning the technical etudes, I suggest breaking them down. One can certainly break them into several larger sections, but I would recommend going further than that—all the way down to measures or parts of measures. Find related patterns: scale patterns, chord patterns, harmonic and melodic patterns—any way that measures and sections are related—and practice them out of context. Change the rhythms in particularly technical passages. Practice syncopated and reverse syncopated, double up notes, go slowly, and practice starting from the end. Be able to play in every key that appears in the etude. (Most etudes are not solely in one key.) Play the scale of the etude's key as well as the relative and parallel major or minor scales. Play triads, seventh chords, and thirds in the etude's key(s), and be able to play chromatic thirds if needed.

One of my all-time favorite ways to practice is starting from the end. Take the last measure, or part of the last measure, and play to the end. When this is comfortable, add a note or a beat or part of a measure or a full measure. Play from your new starting point to the end. Keep adding to it until you have the entire section you needed to work

on. In this way, you are always working towards the familiar, instead of starting strong and proceeding into unfamiliar territory. You want to know what is coming up, and you want to feel secure as you approach what is ahead.

Another favorite method is going slowly. I always say, "the less time I have to work on something, the slower I practice it." It works. Slow practice is wonderful for muscle memory in the fingers. Feel every note. Allow yourself to feel physically relaxed so that you practice playing without the tension that often results from the stress of practicing and playing too fast. Do not play the next note until all the fingers are ready. There are several ways you can practice slowly. One of the best ways is to play your passage at whatever tempo you know you can play it perfectly. It does not matter how slow it is. Play it perfectly at a tempo that feels easy, and then find that tempo on the metronome. Once you know this tempo, you have your starting point. From here, you can either progress naturally—increasing the tempo as you get faster through repetition—or set daily or weekly tempo goals and repeat at incremental tempos as much as you need to get to the next faster tempo. Alternately, I like to set the metronome to the goal tempo, but give that beat to a subdivision. If the goal tempo is quarter note = 126, maybe 126 becomes the eighth note, or even the sixteenth note. In this way, I am always working with the goal tempo, but still practicing slowly. Once you have mastered this tempo at a tiny subdivision, you can make it a larger subdivision. Eventually, you will be playing at the goal tempo.

Rhythm play is another of my all-time favorite technique work methods. For example, if you have a four beat run of sixteenth notes, you may play them all as dotted eighth-sixteenth patterns. The next time around, play sixteenth-dotted eighth patterns. Then two eights, two sixteenths. Then two sixteenths, two eighths. Next, play one eighth, two sixteenths, one eighth. Finally, one sixteenth, two eighths, one sixteenth. In this way, you have played all the notes sequentially fast at one point or another. Finally, put them all back together in straight sixteenths. The rhythmic variations work the muscle memory in both the fingers and the brain and provide repetition. For triplets, I like to practice in sixteenth-eighth-sixteenth patterns as well as one eighth-two sixteenths, and two sixteenths-one eighth. Always do this practice with a metronome. While using this method, you can also use the practicing-from-the-end method.

Once you have become proficient at your technical etude, work not just on playing the entire etude straight through from beginning to end, but also in large sections. Generally, you will not play the entire etude at contest—you must be able to start and stop in any spot, so it is good to incorporate this into your practicing.

Lyrical Etudes

The lyrical etudes are often quite beautiful. Of course, we want a lovely, pure, in-tune tone with an appropriate vibrato and fitting dynamics, but careful attention must also be paid to the rhythm. Rhythmic inaccuracy shows a lack of attention to detail and leaves the listener wondering about the strength of the player. Counting is key. Feel (and mark in your music) where ties end and subdivide everything. If a long note is going into a subdivided beat, be sure you are already subdividing in the rhythm of the next beat on the previous longer, held out note.

In the ideal world, we would have perfect tone, perfect dynamics, and perfect intonation. If it is a question of dynamics or tone, I would sacrifice dynamics for tone. In other words, make sure you have a beautiful tone rather than fading and losing your tone completely, or crescendoing too much and becoming outrageously sharp.

In dealing with flute tone, I have several favorite techniques. First and foremost, I firmly believe that a good sound for any wind instrument results from proper air support found through a strong core. To this end, players can practice while holding a sit up or doing a squat (supporting yourself against a wall will still engage the required muscles), or by sitting in a chair and raising the lower legs to be parallel to the ground. Another technique is humming while playing—this engages the core while still demanding enough air to make an actual sound. I recommend playing through entire passages while humming. For working on sound focus, I like to employ coffee stirrers. The small hole in coffee stirrers (versus soda straws) focuses the aperture (the opening in the lips through which the air passes), allowing for a purer tone. Blow through the coffee stirrer (perhaps even "play" an entire line of music). Then remove the coffee stirrer, but keep the aperture opening the same—you should be able to make the same air sound as you did with the coffee stirrer.

When playing, keep the back of the tongue low in the mouth—this will help tremendously when playing low or leaping in descending intervals. For playing high, keep the mouth relaxed, the tongue low, and the aperture small. To play low, keep the tongue low and angle the air down with the top lip. Remember that low notes and loud notes take a lot of air. To play high and soft, you will use less air and more support, and the lips will need to come forward slightly. Have a firm contact of the flute (lip plate) to the bottom lip; use your lips, but release any facial tension. The only tension you need to use is the support in your core.

When working through your lyrical etude, be sure to subdivide everything. Some etudes shift from one kind of subdivision to another; you must accurately be able to transition from triplets to sixteenths, and to differentiate parts of subdivisions so that eighths, sixteenths, thirty-second notes, and grace notes all sound distinct. Subdivide within longer notes, so that you don't rush through them. Keeping a steady tempo is part of rhythm, so be sure to practice with a metronome. Many lyrical etudes have an incredible amount of technical passage work. What may appear to be a slow etude suddenly presents thirty-second and sixty-fourth note passage work. Utilize the practice methods you used in your technical etude for these moments. Perfect the technique; then return that passage into the slower etude and play it in context. Mark beats and parts of beats, mark breaths, and know that the ends of tied notes are often good places to breathe.

All-State Etudes can be beautiful pieces of music. First and foremost, after all the work you have done to perfect these selections, you must make music. Tell your listener a story, paint a musical picture. If the etude has a name or some programmatic material, you have already been given a creative start. If not, make up your own—you have wonderful ideas in your own mind!

Remember that technical etudes can be musical, and lyrical etudes can be technical. It is possible to play both kinds of etudes with technical perfection and make them beautiful, musical performances. One does not have to choose between being a technical or musical player—you can be both!

Please remember that nothing takes the place of a good teacher especially if you have access to a good private lesson teacher. Even if you cannot go every week (though regular, weekly lessons are best) go and take some lessons. One-on-one instruction will give you the detailed attention that will help you succeed. Listen to your teacher and your band director(s), record yourself when possible, and trust your own musical instincts.

Best wishes for a successful season!

Dr. Christina Guenther is the Associate Professor of Flute at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas where she has taught since 2005. In demand as a clinician and performer, she is a founding member of the Gemini Flute Duo and the Silver Keys Trio, and she performs as a member of the Stone Fort Wind Quintet.