



Flute is Not a Four Letter Word

**CLINICIAN:
Helen Blackburn**

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Texas Bandmasters Association 2013 Convention/Clinic



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Flute is not a four letter word.

Tips for instruction in the classroom setting and beyond

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5:15 pm—6:15 pm
CC 205**

SETTING UP THE EMOUCHURE

SUZUKI INFLUENCED METHOD:

I. Without the flute:

1. Spit an imaginary grain of rice (with tongue in lips—use a quarter note, half note rhythm: “hot dog”):
 - A. down onto plate (low register)
 - B. across table onto brother’s plate (middle register)
 - C. over brother’s head at mom...all the way across the kitchen (high register)

II. With headjoint:

1. Teacher moves headjoint in and out of position
2. Student helps
3. Student does by himself

III. Low, middle, and high on headjoint

IV. Teach regular tongue NOW

Tip of tongue touches roof of mouth – scratch the tip to sensitize it.

ANOTHER METHOD OF TEACHING EMOUCHURE:

1. Place index finger in the dent of chin.
2. Have student say “pure” and blow fast air on their finger.
3. Replace finger with headjoint.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR:

GOOD THINGS:

Approx. 1/4-1/3 of embouchure hole covered by lower lip.
Embouchure plate nestled in dent of chin
Corners relaxed (lips relaxed)
Inside edge of embouchure hole where the pink part of lip meets the chin

BAD THINGS:

Tight corners and lips (“smile” embouchure)
Embouchure plate sitting on red part of lower lip (too high)
Embouchure hole almost totally covered by lower lip (rolled in too far)
Clenched teeth, tight jaw

“BUT HELEN! ISN'T 'KISS-N-ROLL' A GREAT AND EASY WAY TO START THE EMOUCHURE?!?!?”

The horror!!! “Kiss-n-roll” causes a thin, putrescent tone (big, rich tone is virtually impossible) AND it creates even worse intonation tendencies than usual! Please...DON'T EVER TEACH “Kiss-n-roll”!!!

FLUTE ASSEMBLY/ALIGNMENT

1. Align the outside edge of the embouchure hole with the outside edge of the first key on the body of the flute.
2. Align the rod of the foot joint with the middle of the last key on the body of the flute.
3. Be sure to pull the headjoint out a bit.
(A nickel’s thickness is a good starting point. Teach this to beginners from Day 1!)
4. Mark with FINGERNAIL POLISH!!!!
(I promise this won’t hurt your flute – this is one of the best things you can do for development of good tone and hand position! Consistency is a beautiful thing!)

HAND POSITION:

Left Hand:

1. Rest the flute against the “fleshy” part of the first finger (between the base of the finger and the 1st knuckle.)
2. Curve remaining fingers and keep them hovering just above their respective keys (pinky, too!)
3. Push the wrist (or palm) gently towards footjoint. (This will enable the ring finger to curve.)

Right Hand:

1. Shake arm to relax, then let the hand relax naturally at side of body.
2. Raise hand so thumb and first finger form a natural “C” (as if holding a big orange.)
3. Place thumb under the first finger or the 1st trill key.
4. Curve fingers up and over the rods (so they form 3 “T”s with the rods.)
5. Pads of fingers in center of keys.

GOOD HAND POSITION = GOOD TECHNIQUE

(Therefore, bad hand position = bad technique and *often* bad tone/intonation!)

WATCH OUT FOR THE FOLLOWING:

1. Don’t let fingers lop off over the edges of the keys.
2. Don’t let RH fingers rest on the rods.
3. Keep fingers relaxed and curved (watch out for fingers bending backwards like “Bambi legs”).
4. Keep pinkies hovering just above their keys (don’t let them stick up toward the ceiling.)

Highly recommended to reinforce good hand position: Runyon Non-Slip Flute Cushion (\$2.99 for two at www.fluteworld.com)

TONE

BASICS:

1. Air Speed (velocity)
2. Air volume
3. Air direction
4. Size of aperture

3 ½ SECRET OF A GOOD TONE:

- ½. Take a HUGE breath
1. Open teeth up wide (1-2 finger widths)/Drop jaw
2. Blow a super-fast airstream
3. Blow down into the hole (use upper lip to aim air...think "beak")
(Demonstrate air speed and direction by blowing on finger)

Because of physical differences, not all flutists will look "right" in order to get their best sound (for example, a Cupid's bow almost always requires playing off to one side.)

If they sound good, but look funny—don't change anything! ("If it ain't broke, don't fix it!")

WATCH AND LISTEN FOR:

1. Tense throat – often accompanied by throat noise (difficult to cure, but often caused by too little air—reinforce the idea of moving lots of air from the bottom of the lungs; singing & playing at the same time helps—see "Lookout" exercise.)
"Freedom of air=freedom of tone" **TENSION KILLS TONE!**
2. Flute drooping at angle not parallel to opening in lips – causes fuzzy, distorted sound.

COMMON CAUSES OF:

THIN, WEAK TONE:

Poor support
Too much embouchure hole covered
Arched tongue
Aperture (opening in lips) too tight (Tension kills tone)
Teeth clenched together (Tension kills tone)

UNFOCUSED TONE:

Embouchure hole too uncovered
Aperture too big

PLAYING HIGH AND LOW

BASICS:

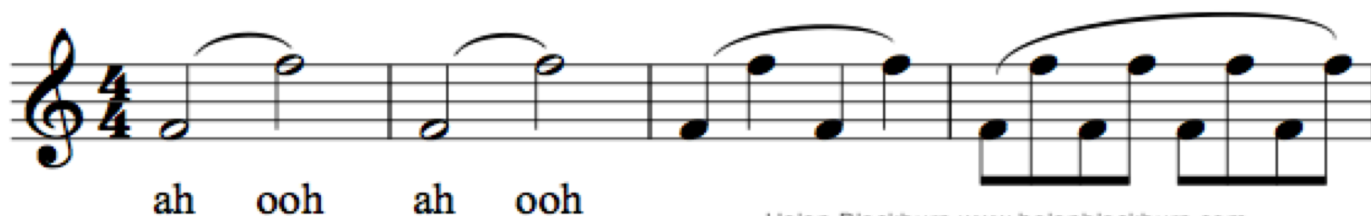
TO PLAY LOW:

Keep teeth open, jaw relaxed
Aim air more down into the hole (use upper lip "beak" to aim)
Think "Ah"

TO PLAY HIGH:

Push lips forward (corners move forward toward front teeth)
Aim air more across embouchure hole
Think "Ooh"

Ah-Ooh Exercise:
(Adapted from Mary Karen Clardy)



2 BIGGEST NAUGHTY NO-NOS:

1. Never instruct students to pull corners of lips back (making embouchure tighter) to play higher. (This makes 3rd octave thin, shrill, and extremely sharp – sometimes even causes lips to buzz.) **Remember: push lips forward to play higher!**
2. Don't try to make young players play softly in the 3rd octave. (This causes embouchure to tighten, air support to sag, teeth to clench, pitch to go even higher, etc.) Encourage them to play very strongly in the beginning! (Control will come later...until then you may want to wear earplugs!)

MISCELLANEOUS POINTERS:

A GENTLE SUGGESTION:

Teach the full range of the flute as early as possible. A 3-octave chromatic scale (with all correct fingerings **including lever Bb**) should be attainable within the first year. The sooner the students are exposed to the lowest and highest notes, the easier it will be. Also, teach double tonguing ASAP! It's fun and reinforces a dropped jaw with fast air that must be aimed down into the flute.

(Of course, you may have to supplement most beginning band methods.)

POSTURE POINTERS:

Posture:

1. Lift from ribcage (chest stays expanded on inhale and exhale.)
2. Keep head balanced (balance a bean bag on top of head.)
3. Turn head slightly to the left...point chin toward left elbow.

Shoulders should be relaxed and down (watch out for left shoulder)...shrug shoulders to the ears, then let them drop.

Easy Posture Exercise: Squat down, put elbows on knees, bring flute into position without moving elbows, then stand up and VOILA! Perfect flute position!

When seated, “stand while seated.”

Marching band position (with the flute parallel to the ground & right arm pulled back/left arm pulled across the body) is NOT a viable flute playing position! It's OK for the flute to droop a bit...and it should be a slightly “forward” instrument.

EMBOUCHURE:

Drop jaw from hinge and glide forward and back to find the optimal position.

Experiment with vowel shapes inside the mouth: “A, ah, E, eh, I, O, ooh, uh” to find optimal resonance.

The wet part of the lip surrounds the air like 2 cushions (the lips cushion the air).

Keep tongue relaxed (“AH”) and “down” (tongue should lie on the floor of the mouth like a blanket or rug).

Keep jaw relaxed.

AIM the airstream with upper lip (think of it as a beak). Aim down for low notes; more across for high notes (slide jaw forward, too).

No stiff upper lip! Keep it supple & flexible...release it away from the top teeth so there is a cushion of air between the upper lip and teeth. (*See “Ding, Dong” Whistle Tone exercises*)

Clarinet=Concrete; Flute=Jello

AIRSTREAM:

Although flute requires a great deal of air, don't **force** too much air through the flute. Like Goldilocks you need just the right amount... not too much or too fast, not too little or too slow. Allow the air to flow unrestricted by the throat, the tongue, or the lips. Just use the lips to gently guide the fast, but unforced airstream. (*See “Magic Carpet” Harmonics exercise*)

TONE:

Strive for freedom of tone. A beautiful, unrestricted, singing sound is the goal!

As with all wind instruments, you must hear the tone inside your head before you can produce it on your instrument. Listening to fine performers (not just flute...all other wind instruments, strings, vocal) is crucial! Attend live performances! Listen to great recordings!

RECOMMENDED ARTISTS FOR LISTENING (FLUTE):

Emmanuel Pahud
Matthieu Dufour

Joshua Smith
Marina Piccinini
Amy Porter

Timothy Hutchins
Paula Robison

MAINTENANCE

Unlike many other instruments, the flute is best maintained without any special oils, powders, salves, polishing cloths, etc.

To clean inside: I prefer a handkerchief (or other lint-free cloth) and the cleaning rod.

To clean outside: A clean, damp cloth is best (just barely wet with water—alcohol works well, too.) Fancy silver polishes aren't necessary. Liquid silver polish is NOT GOOD! Residue may gunk up mechanism and/or damage pads.

HEADJOINT TIPS:

(Once a month or so...)

1. Clean embouchure hole w/toothpaste and a Q-tip.
2. Rinse headjoint well with water (you may clean with a mild dish detergent.)
3. Soak headjoint overnight in a sink full of water (Actually—only do this in case of emergency...it's MUCH better to replace the cork regularly...I know it sounds crazy, but it's a “band-aid” if the cork is loose & you can't get it in to the repair shop.)

Teach students to check cork placement and condition from time to time – this affects not only intonation, but also TONE!!!

Teach students to practice “PREVENTIVE MAINTENANCE”:

1. Take care not to grab keys when assembling/disassembling flute.
2. Rest flute with keys up (whether in lap, on table, etc.) Keys down causes bent rods and adjustment nightmares.
3. Inspect flute for “fuzzy” or split pads. This is a sign that it is past time to have those pads replaced. (Usually it's a sign that the other pads are soon to follow, so a full repad may be in order.)
4. Encourage students to take flute to the shop at least once a year for a “check-up”. Leaks and adjustment problems often happen gradually and the student compensates by pressing harder and harder, which develops bad technique, hand position, etc.

You'll be AMAZED by the number of “tone, intonation, and technical problems” that are MIRACULOUSLY CURED when the flute is in perfect condition!!!

NAUGHTY NO-NOS:

1. Do not use Vaseline, cork grease, slide oil, or anything like this to make joints fit together more easily! Clean the tenons (connecting joints) with a damp cloth until they are “sparkling” and have no black or green residue. If there is still a problem, take it to the repair shop. (The residue from lubricating materials will end up on the pads and cause them to have a shortened lifespan.)
2. Rubbing the joints with pencil lead isn't advised, either – if the joints are clean they should work smoothly.
3. Do not use any kind of powder on pads to prevent stickiness! This only gums up the pads and makes things worse! If you're desperate, use a piece of cigarette paper (or a dollar bill if you're really desperate) and tap (don't drag) to clean the pad, but use this method as infrequently as possible since it causes the pads to wear out faster.

Highly recommended to cure sticky pads: Pad Juice (\$13) – available through J.L. Smith: www.jlsmithco.com

THE GREAT B-FLAT MYSTERY

There is no "RIGHT" or "WRONG" fingering for B-flat...it's a matter of efficiency!
Teach **all three** (yes, three!) fingerings in the first year!!!

THUMB B-flat (TBb):

1. Use **any time the key signature has 1 or more flats**. (exception: 6 or more flats: G-flat or C-flat Major)
2. Do **not** use TBb in keys w/no flats or for the chromatic scale.
3. **DO NOT ROLL THUMB FROM Bb to B-natural (except in infrequent advanced passage)**

LEVER B-flat (L):

1. Introduce w/chromatic scale and B Major scale.
2. Lever is almost **always** the best (most efficient) fingering for A#.
3. Lever is great for G/B-flat/B-natural passages (& the enharmonic equivalent)
4. Use for any chromatic scale or when B-natural and B-flat occur side by side.

ONE and ONE B-flat (1&1):

1. 1&1 is great for F/B-flat/B-natural or any passage in which RH #1 is down preceding B-flat/B-natural.
2. Use for any chromatic scale or when B-natural and B-flat occur side by side.

IN GENERAL:

1. **Thumb** should be on the **B-flat** side if key signature has **1-5 flats**.
2. **Thumb** should be on the **B-natural** side if key signature doesn't have flats. (or if the key sig. has 6+ flats.)
3. I actually use **Thumb Bb** and **Lever Bb** MUCH more frequently than **1&1 Bb**!!!

INTONATION

CHECK FIRST:

1. Is the flute in good mechanical condition?
2. Is the headjoint cork nice and tight and in the right spot?
3. Is the headjoint lined up correctly?

TUNING:

1. Double check the cork setting.
2. Start with the headjoint pulled out about a nickel's thickness. (Pull out further for most "step-up" flutes which usually need to be pulled 2-3 times as far. This applies to all A-442 instruments.)
3. **DO NOT TUNE BY ROLLING IN/ROLLING OUT or MOVING HEAD UP and DOWN!!!!** This is the last resort!!!!...Instead, blow more down INTO the hole (to lower the pitch) or blow more across the hole (to raise the pitch.) (Aim by using upper lip & moving the jaw.)

NEVER, ever, EVER MOVE THE CORK IN THE HEADJOINT TO FIX PITCH PROBLEMS!!! This is treating the symptom, not the disease.

Also, BE VERY WARY OF PULLING HEADJOINT TOO FAR!!! You will change the scale of the flute (again...you're treating the symptom, not the disease).
(Work on tone production problems instead!)

Flute placement on lip really, REALLY affects tone and intonation! The lower the better.

Practice with a tuner, but be sure to play a good sound, in tune...not an in-tune, bad sound.

If the flute is in good mechanical shape (no leaks, tight headjoint corks), and the headjoint is pulled-out properly and lined-up correctly: "In Tone=In Tune".

NATURAL PITCH TENDENCIES:

Low register (low G-low C/B) – tends to be FLAT

Middle C#--tends to be SHARP (learn to play in tune by adjusting the embouchure...adding right hand is a crutch)

High register (E-flat-High C) – tends to be SHARP

TIPS FOR FLUTE STUDENTS

(Things I've learned from my students and myself over the years.)

by Helen Blackburn...Yvonne Franklin Endowed Chair, Artist Teacher of Flute – WTAMU,
Principal Flute – Dallas Opera Orchestra

1. FUNDAMENTALS are the SHORTCUT!! (Scales, arpeggios, tone, vibrato & articulation exercises, perfect posture, perfect hand position, relaxed embouchure, great breathing.) Spend time every day on fundamentals...reward yourself with pieces.
2. Practice in front of a mirror – constantly evaluate (& correct) your posture/body position, hand position and embouchure. (Look at yourself in the mirror...not the floor, wall or ceiling!)
3. PRACTICE SLOWLY to develop good habits and muscle memory.
4. PRACTICE EVERY DAY! A little bit every day is much better than a whole lot once or twice a week.
5. Always HAVE A PLAN for what you want to accomplish & how you're going to go about it.
6. Always COUNT the rhythm before you play. Subdivision is the secret of life! (Tongue the subdivisions as an intermediate step to help w/subdivision.)
7. Practice what you aren't good at YET.
8. Be "present" when practicing. (Just going through the motions is a total waste of time.)
9. Practice mentally.
10. Practice fingering without blowing.
11. Practice with the headjoint turned upside down.
12. Learn to play softly and loudly correctly (i.e. without letting tone & intonation suffer.)
13. Play long tones for a few minutes every day. (Be sure your ears are "ON".)
14. Learn all of the trill fingerings. Trill exercises are fabulous technique builders. (Trevor Wye trill study—p. 73-74; Taffanel/Gaubert—EJ 17, Garner "Triller Thrillers")
15. LISTEN to as many live performances as possible. (Flute, orchestral, other instruments, voice, etc.)
16. LISTEN to recordings. Start a CD library. (And LISTEN to them often!)
17. SING your pieces!
18. DANCE to your music!
19. Learn all 3 fingerings for A#/B-flat (Thumb B-flat, Lever, 1&1) and when & where to use them. (Be flexible...not stubborn! This will change your life!!)
20. Drop your jaw. (Try using a pencil eraser, wine cork cut in half, or a small piece of carrot to keep teeth apart.)
21. FIND A GREAT TEACHER that fits you and the way you play now. (Ask around...schedule a trial lesson.)
22. Learn to DOUBLE TONGUE as soon as possible. Start TODAY if you haven't yet!
23. Play the PICCOLO!
24. Practice with a tuner to learn the tendencies of your instrument, but use your ears to hear!!
25. "In tone" = "In tune"
26. HAVE FUN!!! (If you're not enjoying it, take a break & come back later...you'll accomplish more!)

COMMON PROBLEMS (& solutions)

1. Thin, airy tone. (Move flute lower on chin, drop jaw, aim air down.)
2. Sharp, shrill tone. (Drop jaw and relax embouchure...esp. corners and upper lip.)
3. Wrong fingerings:
 - LH #1 must be up for middle D and E-flat and high B-flat.
 - F# must be fingered with RH #3 (ring finger)....not #2 (middle finger) (you may finger high F# w/middle finger.)
 - RH pinky should be down for E natural in the low & middle registers.
4. "Monstrous" hand position. (Curve fingers & depress the keys with the pad of the finger.)
5. "Rockette" fingers. (Keep fingers low & close to the keys.)
6. "Nanny goat" vibrato. (Pulse in 8th notes, triplets, 16ths...ask your teacher for more vibrato exercises.)

RECOMMENDED FLUTE ARTISTS

(available on CDs, Amazon, iTunes, etc...this is just the beginning...there are many fine performers not listed here...)

Emmanuel Pahud (International artist, Principal Flute – Berlin Philharmonic)
Jacques Zoon (International artist, former Principal Flute – Boston Symphony)
Paula Robison (Solo artist)
Timothy Hutchins (Principal Flute – Montreal Symphony)
Jeanne Baxtresser (former Principal Flute – NY Philharmonic)
Goran Marcussen (Fabulous Swedish flutist)
Claire Southworth (Wonderful English flutist)
Marina Piccinini (Solo artist, Professor of flute – Peabody Conservatory)
Mathieu Dufour (Principal Flute – Chicago Symphony)
Amy Porter (Professor of Flute – University of Michigan)
Manuela Weisler (International artist)
Alexa Still (Professor of flute – Oberlin Conservatory)
Kirsten Spratt (another wonderful English flutist)
Julius Baker (former Principal Flute – NY Philharmonic...before Baxtresser)
Barthold Kuijken (Historical flute specialist)
Janet See (Historical flute specialist)

A note about the following exercises:

Please feel free to copy and distribute any exercise or bit of information you find useful in this document, however, please keep my name and website on the pages (if, for no other reason, so people can visit the website and contact me should they have questions).

Helen Blackburn's Super-Duper Zen Yoga Warm-Up

(to increase strength, flexibility, balance and patience . . . of embouchure, tone and mind.)

1 Over The Rainbow Wake-Up

$\text{♩} = 50$ Lever (Low & Middle Register w/octave slur)

f/mf 1st x - N.V.
2nd x - with vibrato

or for a quick warm-up: No repeats - m. 1 - NV;
m. 2 - w/vib.

- Start with a round, resonant tone.
- Lips slide forward when slurring to upper octave
- Connect between the notes w/air (and connect with vibrato when using vib.)
- Be sure octaves are in tune.
- Taper the half-note release without going flat.

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2 Magic Carpet

$\text{♩} = 50$ (Leone Buyse's Harmonics)

f N.V. + vib N.V. + vib simile . . . TB

Lever

- Be sure the corners of your lips are in NEUTRAL
 - don't produce the harmonics by pulling corners back towards your ears.
- Use your AIR! Strive for FREEDOM of air, embouchure and tone.
- Start out playing this exercise forte with a great airflow (your air is your "magic carpet" that everything rides on: sound, vibrato, phrasing, articulation . . . even your fingers!)
- Eventually, when your embouchure is strong, try this exercise at all dynamic levels: mf, mp, p, pp
 - but be sure to keep your air moving!

3 Up and Away

(3rd Octave w/octave slur)

$\text{♩} = 50$

(• same instructions as #1)

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4 Ding, Dong

www.helenblackburn.com

(Whistle Tones)

(adapted from Peter-Lukas Graf)

Finger the 3rd octave notes, but produce whistle tones as notated.

- Drop your jaw (stretch your chin away from your nose - far!)
- Roll out - FAR!
- No pressure with the Left hand.
- Release upper lip away from teeth. Use your “beak” to aim the air. (Feel the air travel on the inside “wet” part of your aperture.)
- If you hear air, you're blowing too hard. (if you're having a hard time finding the whistle tone, try fingering the 3rd octave note, but play as if you're playing a note 3 octaves lower - ppppp - just fog up the embouchure plate.) (It may also help to try to whistle and/or sing the note you are aiming for.)
- Have patience! (This is the “zen” part - if you're trying to right way, you're getting the full benefits. You will improve every day!) The harder you work, the less results you will see . . . let go . . . surrender. (STOP if you get frustrated.)

⑥ "Gut Puffs" Vibrato Exercise

(Adapted from Gary and Brad Garner)



• Use "gut puffs" or throat staccato (try both!) NO TONGUE!



* Increase tempo to ♩. = 70 - (80)



• As the tempo increases, let the triplets run together (this usually happens around dotted ♩. = 80)

* Increase tempo to ♩. = 80 - (90)



* Increase tempo to ♩. = 90 - (100)





* Increase tempo to ♩. = 100 - (110)

(pulses move up into throat around here)



* Increase tempo to ♩. = 110 - (120)



- CRACKING & SQUACKING? - Drop your jaw, roll out, relax upper lip, try putting air in your cheeks.
- If you do this exercise consistently and correctly you'll be amazed at the improvement in your tone and articulation in addition to vibrato! (Interesting, since you are not playing long tones or using your tongue - it's all about the air!)

For more Super-Duper Zen Yoga Warm-Ups, including: #5 Angela's Teeter Toter (tapers and playing pianissimo), #7 The World's Greatest Double Tonguing Exercise, Lookout (Playing and Singing), Multiphonics and Triller Thrillers, visit www.helenblackburn.com.