



**Texas Bandmasters Association  
Convention/Clinic July 22-24, 2021**

**Proper Care and Feeding of Your  
Beginner Flute Class - Setting up for  
Success Down the Road**

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**HENRY B. GONZALEZ CONVENTION CENTER - SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS**

# PROPER CARE AND FEEDING OF YOUR BEGINNER FLUTE CLASS: SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS DOWN THE ROAD

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Helen Blackburn and Megan Seymore, Clinicians

## SELECTING STUDENTS FOR FLUTE

There are very few physical characteristics that prevent or limit a student from playing the flute well. However, the following attributes should be taken into consideration when placing students on an instrument:

- Underbite (bottom teeth are in front of upper teeth) – will make it difficult to aim the air down into the embouchure hole.
- Teardrop or “Cupid’s Bow” – usually requires aperture to be formed off-center.
- Very small physical stature – may cause difficulty holding the flute with good posture, hand position, and balance; may also cause difficulty with breath control in the beginning.

## BEFORE THE FIRST SOUNDS ARE MADE

Kids are typically excited and eager, which should be encouraged! Be careful not to allow their enthusiasm to cause you to skip steps. Meticulous attention to detail in the beginning is paramount to ensuring an unhindered future on the instrument. Insist on the “non-negotiables” of good posture and playing position, good air, good articulation, and good rhythm from the first day!

*“Go slow in the beginning so you can go fast later.”*

## EQUIPMENT

- **Student Essentials**
  - A working flute (see below for our recommendations)
  - Mirror ([link here](#))
  - Flute cleaning rod with soft handkerchief (like a bandana or cheese cloth - not fuzzy “pad saver,” like a pipe cleaner)
  - Method book of director’s choice (see below for our recommendations)
  - Folding music stand
  - Metronome and tuner (We highly recommend the “Tonal Energy” app.)
  - Pencil
- **Band Director Essentials**
  - A working flute
  - Red nail polish
  - Black (clarinet/sax) mouthpiece non-slip cushions (2 per student - you will use these to show placement of LH index finger and RH thumb) ([link here](#))
  - Pneumo Pro (optional) ([link here](#))

## FLUTE ASSEMBLY/ALIGNMENT

- Teachers: collect all flutes, mark alignment with nail polish, and apply non-slip cushions *before* starting on the instrument.
- **Headjoint:** Align the center of the embouchure hole with the center of the 1<sup>st</sup> open hole; OR (Helen Blackburn's *slight* variation) align the outside edge (the strike edge) of the embouchure hole with the outside edge of the 1st key on the body of the flute (this variation will be turned in *ever so slightly*).
  - **Always pull the headjoint out one-eighth to one-quarter inch.** Don't worry about getting the exact "correct" distance in the beginning. The important point is that beginners learn that the headjoint must be pulled out a bit for proper assembly. Don't insist on beginner flutists playing in tune. Let them play almost "overblown" for the 1<sup>st</sup> year until they learn how to use lots of air and to *aim* the air with a flexible embouchure and jaw.
  - **Footjoint:** Align the small silver ball on the rod of the footjoint with the middle of the last key on the body of the flute (the D key).
- **Prepare and mark the flute:**
  - Mark headjoint and footjoint position with a swipe of red nail polish. This will not hurt the flute and is one of the best things you can do for development of tone and hand position. (Consistency is a beautiful thing!)
  - Apply non-slip mouthpiece cushions as follows:
    - **Left hand:** Place a cushion on the side, slightly under the two topmost keys (the C and C# keys). (This is where the flute will balance on the LH index finger.)
    - **Right hand:** Place 1 non-slip cushion under the F key (the key operated by RH1), slightly up toward the rods. (This is where the flute will balance on the RH thumb.) RH thumb placement may be slightly to the right or left depending on shape and size of hands. Flutists with double-jointed thumbs often find a placement pointing to the left of "normal" works best.

## SITTING AND HOLDING THE FLUTE

- **Chair and music stand position:**
  - Space chairs at least 18" apart. (Flutists must have adequate space between chairs, or they will develop postural and hand position problems, which translate into tone, intonation, and technique problems.)
  - Turn the chair to the right, approximately 45 degrees.
  - Teach students to sit on the front left corner of the chair, with their feet flat on the floor.
  - Music stand should be one flute's length away from the player.
  - The top of the music stand should be no higher than the top of the shoulders.
- **Posture and playing position:**
  - Neck and spine should be "long and tall" with the head balanced on top of the spine.
  - Keep chin parallel to the floor...eyes on the horizon.
  - Lift from ribcage (so chest stays expanded on inhale and exhale).

- o Turn the head slightly to the left...point chin toward left elbow.
- o Both shoulders should be relaxed and down away from the ears.
- o Create some space between the body and the flute by pushing the foot joint away from the body. "Marching band position" (with the flute parallel to the ground and right arm pulled back/left arm pulled across the body) is NOT a viable flute playing position! The flute should be a slightly "forward" instrument, and it's OK for the flute to droop a bit. The flute, right arm, and body should form a triangle.
- o **Easy posture exercise: "Elbows to knees":**
  1. Lean forward, putting elbows on knees, and bring flute into playing position, being sure to turn head to the left, keep right wrist straight, and left wrist bent.
  2. Sit up straight while maintaining this position (elbows coming off the knees). (Flute will be forward and angled down.)

## PRODUCING THE FIRST SOUNDS

There is not one magic method of starting beginner flutists that works for 100% of students 100% of the time. You need to have a good grasp of what a good embouchure *looks* like and several different approaches to teaching embouchure. The best way to understand this is to do it yourself! Get a flute and experiment on your own until you are comfortable demonstrating for your students. You *must* be able to model embouchure and airstream!

## TEACHING EMOUCHURE

- **Start with the headjoint only.** (But do not stay *only* on the headjoint for months! We recommend adding the body of the flute when most of the class is producing a strong sound and using the tongue to start the sound.)
- **Align the embouchure hole with the aperture.** Because of physical differences, not all flutists will look symmetrical or "correct" in order to get their best sound. (For example, a Cupid's Bow almost always requires playing off to one side.) Look for the natural opening in the lips (the aperture) and line up the embouchure hole with the aperture.
- **Keep the chin parallel to the floor and the embouchure hole facing the ceiling.** (Do not roll the headjoint in or up to try to find the airstream.) Have students experiment aiming the air by using their jaw and lips to "bring the airstream to the flute" rather than bringing the flute to the airstream.
- **Place the headjoint in the dent of the chin.** Specifics to look for are:
  - o "Pouty" lower lip
  - o Relaxed lip corners ("neutral" position)
  - o Embouchure plate nestled in dent of chin ("put the hotdog in the bun") ☺
  - o Place the inside edge of the embouchure hole at the bottom edge of the lower lip. (This is a good starting place for *most* people. Try placing it a bit lower for extra thin lips or placing it a bit higher for thicker lips.)
  - o Lower lip should cover approximately 1/4 - 1/3 of the embouchure hole.

- o The note produced on the headjoint alone should be a nice, strong (almost over-blown) A-natural (not A-flat!).
- o Teach the student to “keep the head where it grows” and “bring the flute to your face” so they don’t reach forward with the head.

## SEVERAL APPROACHES TO TEACHING FIRST SOUNDS/EMBOUCHURE WITH HEADJOINT ONLY

- **Suzuki-Influenced Method:** (also explained in back of Flute 101 book)

[\(link to Flute 101\)](#)

### I. Without the headjoint:

- A. Spit an imaginary grain of rice 3 different directions with tongue in lips, using a quarter note-half note rhythm (you can use the words “hot dog” to help teach the rhythm):
  1. **Down** onto your own plate (low register)
  2. **Across** table onto sibling’s plate (middle register)
  3. **Over** sibling’s head at mom (across the kitchen) (high register)

### II. With the headjoint:

- A. Teacher moves headjoint in and out of position while the student “spits the grain of rice” onto their plate.
- B. Student helps the teacher move headjoint in and out – find the “magic” spot.
- C. Student does this independently.
- D. When the student is getting good sound consistently, immediately switch articulation point to roof of mouth. (Scratch the tip of the tongue to make it sensitive; tip of tongue hits roof of mouth.) (\*See Articulation section for more details.)

- **“Pure” or “Pooh” Method:**

1. Place index finger in the dent of chin (“put the hotdog in the bun”).
2. Say “pure” or “pooh” and blow fast air onto finger.
3. Replace finger with headjoint.

- **Pneumo-Pro Method**

Explained clearly in pp. 3-10 of Blocki Method Book [\(link here\)](#).

- **Kiss-N-Roll Method**

**No, no, no, no, no!!** Do not ever teach kiss-n-roll! It causes a thin tone and creates terrible intonation problems because it is placed tooooooo high on the chin.

## ARTICULATION

- **Teach students to tongue on day one** (or within the first week at the latest)!

Whatever method(s) of teaching embouchure you use, don’t delay teaching articulation! If students play *one day* without tonguing, you now have to *break a habit* to teach them to tongue!

- **The tip of the tongue should touch the roof of the mouth** at the same spot as when enunciating “Tu” or “Du” when speaking. The exact spot where the tongue touches the roof of the mouth may vary depending on shape of teeth, overbite, etc. and also on the octave or type of attack desired. The “normal” contact point is somewhere between where the front teeth meet the upper palate and the ridge of the mouth, approximately ¼-inch behind the front teeth.
- **Look and listen for signs that a student is “anchor” tonguing** or using the middle of the tongue to articulate (often a “smacking” sound). Nip this in the bud immediately!
- **Teach the students to “dent the airstream”** with their tongue or to “tongue on the airstream.” (Think “whole-note airstream” or “birthday candle air.”)
- **Continue to play on headjoint every day for 1-2 weeks** during band class (using supplemental books for headjoint exercises) until all students are making a consistent tone and are tonguing the start of each note.
- **Play on the headjoint alone a lot in the beginning, and less as time progresses.**
- **Teach students to double tongue earlier, rather than later!** It’s fun! It’s easy! And it will improve their use of air! (Try to start a simple double-tongue exercise in late fall or early spring if possible.)

### **FIRST NOTES ON THE ASSEMBLED FLUTE**

When most students are consistently able to produce a good tone on the headjoint alone, teach them to assemble and hold the flute properly, then start on middle B-natural (middle line in the staff). Middle B-natural is the *best* “first” note because it is the easiest note to produce (least resistant) and the flute is balanced in their hands. Teachers may need to supplement beginner band methods with pages from the books recommended below rather than start on a note other than B-natural.

- **Teach the notes in the following order: B-A-G-F** (Flute 101 recommends holding the barrel of the flute in the start, then adding RH when you learn F.) ([link to Flute 101](#))
- **Pay careful attention to the RH position** as these fingers are not being utilized in the beginning; fingers should always be curved up and over the rods, hovering just above the “home” keys.
- Once these notes are achieved consistently with good tone and hand position, you can **begin simple octave slurs.**
- **The lips should slide forward** when going from lower to higher notes.

### **HAND POSITION**

Good hand position = good technique, tone, and intonation! Instruct the students that the flute is *balanced* (not “gripped” or “held”) between the chin, the LH index finger, the RH thumb, and (for most notes) the RH pinky.

- **Left hand specifics:**
  - Find the “fleshy” part of the first finger, between the base of the finger and the 1<sup>st</sup> knuckle, and make a “ledge” with it. (Mark this spot with a sticker or

allow the students to draw a star or smiley face using a Sharpie on this spot.) The flute rests on this “ledge.”

- o Curve remaining fingers and keep them hovering just above their respective keys. Pinky should be curved, too!
- o Pads of fingers (or fingerprints) should press the center of the keys.
- o Push the wrist (or palm) gently towards footjoint. The left wrist should be gently bent. This will enable the ring finger and pinky to curve.
- o Thumb should be straight (*not* bent) and perpendicular to the body of the flute.
- **Right hand specifics:**
  - o Shake arm to relax, then let the hand relax naturally at the side of the body.
  - o Raise hand so the thumb and first finger form a natural backward “C” (as if holding an orange or cheeseburger).
  - o Curve fingers up and over the rods (so the fingers form 3 “Ts” with the rods).
  - o Pads of fingers (or fingerprints) should press the center of the keys.
  - o Right wrist should be straight. (Straight line from knuckles to elbows.)
- **Both hands:**
  - o All fingers (including pinkies) should hover just above their keys. (Don’t let pinkies stick up toward the ceiling or hang down below the Ab key.)
  - o Keep fingers relaxed and curved.
  - o Watch out for hyper-extended/double-jointed fingers (aka “Bambi legs”). This may cause the fingers to collapse at one or both joints. Simple finger-strengthening exercises with squeeze-balls, rubber-bands, etc. may help this problem. (Check spring tension on the Eb key as an over-tight spring can exacerbate this problem.)

## BASICS OF FLUTE SOUND

Flute tone production is dependent upon the “3 Vs”:

- **Volume** (the quantity/amount of air)
- **Velocity** (the speed/pressure of the airstream)
- **Vector** (the angle of the airstream)

### VOLUME/VELOCITY

- **Airstream must be fast and strong:** “birthday candle air!”
- Teach students to take **deep, full breaths** from the beginning; ***almost every tone/embouchure/intonation/articulation problem is rooted in an “air problem.”***
- **Tone is 90% air and 10% embouchure.** If the *air* is used correctly, correct embouchure development will follow. It is much better to use a little too much air in the beginning; too little air will result in tightness, tension, and pinching.
- Although the flute requires a great deal of air, **don’t force too much air through the flute.** Students must experiment to find the exact right amount and speed of air. (Like Goldilocks...air should not be much or too fast, and should not be too little or too slow.)

- Allow the air to flow *unrestricted* by the throat, tongue, or lips.
- Use the lips to gently *guide* the fast, “free” air.

### VECTOR

- **To play lower and/or stronger** (*this applies both to octave and to intonation*):
  - **“Fast air aimed low”**
  - Keep teeth open, jaw relaxed (as if you’re about to fall asleep on the couch).
  - **Aim air more down into the embouchure hole** (slide jaw back and use upper lip like a “beak” to aim air).
  - **Think of an “Ah” vowel.** The tongue should be relaxed on the floor of the mouth.
- **To play higher &/or softer** (*this applies both to octave and to intonation*):
  - **“Fast air aimed high”**
  - **Push lips forward** (corners move forward towards canine teeth).
  - **Aim air more across the embouchure hole** (slide jaw forward).
  - **Think of an “Ooh” vowel.** The tongue should still be relaxed - *never* in an “eee” vowel position.

### GENERAL TIPS FOR TERRIFIC TONE

- Lead with air...follow with lips.
- In the beginning, it is not so important what it *sounds* like, but what it *looks* like. Emphasis should be on air and embouchure flexibility.
- Remember: Sound is 90% air (fast, “birthday candle” air), 10% embouchure.
- Naughty No-Nos:
  - **Do not instruct students to pull corners of lips back or to “smile”** (making embouchure tighter) to play higher or softer.
  - **Do not scream at your young flute students to play softly in the third octave!** Let young players play strong (loud) in the upper octave. They need to learn to use their air before they can develop the embouchure control and flexibility required to play softly.
  - **Do not instruct students to make the aperture smaller!** Instead, teach them to *aim* lots of fast air. (The aperture will eventually form around the good airstream.)
  - **Do not have “long tone” challenges during the first year!** This just encourages tension and tightness. (Students will figure out breath control with time and patience.)

### MORE EMBOUCHURE/TONE TIPS

- **Keep the jaw relaxed.** Let the jaw hang from the hinge (joint) and glide forward and back to find the optimal position.
- **Experiment with different vowel shapes** inside the mouth to find optimal resonance (A-E-I-O-U). Even trying less-optimal vowels (Ay-Ee-I) will help the player find the more optimal vowels (Ah-Oh-Ooh).
- **The wet part of the lips should surround the airstream.** (The lips cushion the airstream.)



- **Keep the tongue relaxed and down (“Ah”).** (Unlike clarinet and saxophone, the tongue should not move except to articulate! Tongue should lie on the floor of the mouth like a rug.)
- **Aim the airstream with upper lip.** Think of the upper lip as a “beak.” Aim down for low notes; more across for high notes.
- **Keep the upper lip supple and flexible.** Release the upper lip away from the top teeth so there is a cushion of air between the upper lip and upper teeth. No stiff upper lip!
- **Strive for *freedom* of tone.**
- **The embouchure should form around the airstream and create a “lifted” passageway for the air to travel through.** (Do not instruct students to form a small aperture then try to blast the air through.)

## SIMPLE VIBRATO EXERCISES

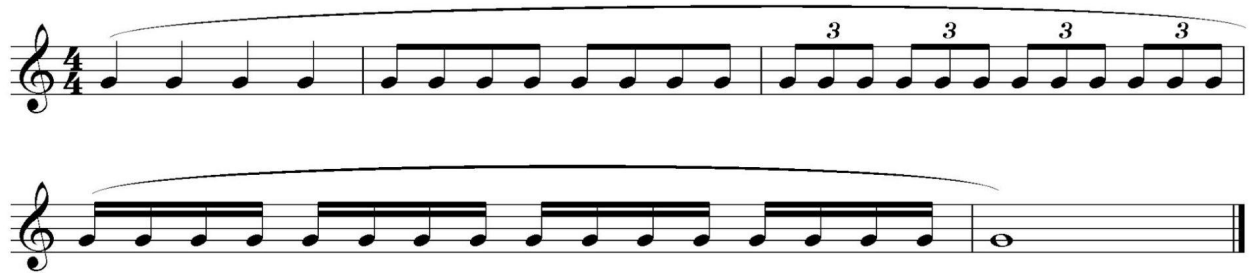
### Vibrato Exercise #1 (“Gut Puffs”)

♩. = 30+

Use quick blasts of air from the diaphragm to produce short, vibrating notes. (Don't tongue at all in this exercise.) It's OK if the cheeks puff!

(cont'd.)

## Vibrato Exercise #2

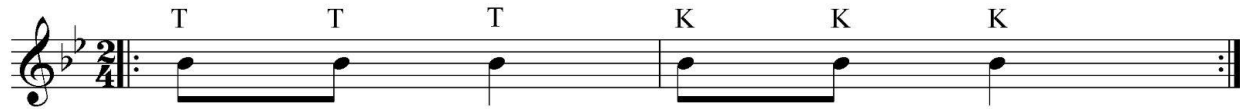


Use big, fat, exaggerated pulses. Try to bend the pitch sharp *and* flat.  
(This exercise can also be played with “gut puffs” or articulated as an articulation/rhythm exercise.)

Start nice and slowly with measure 1. Add one measure at a time as students gain control of the pulse/speed. Never go faster than can be controlled.  
(Tutorial videos and more vibrato exercises can be found at <https://www.helenblackburn.com>. See: **Super Duper Zen Yoga Warmups** and **Videos**)

## SIMPLE DOUBLE TONGUE EXERCISE

Line 1:



Line 2:



- Start with Line 1 on one note (we recommend Thumb Bb) as early in the year as possible (sometime around Thanksgiving is a good goal).
- When students have good mastery of articulating with T and K, advance to Line 2 on Bb.
- Eventually play Line 2 on each note of Bb Major Scale.

(Tutorial videos and the long/advanced version of this double tongue exercise can be found at <https://www.helenblackburn.com>. See: **Super Duper Zen Yoga Warmups and Videos**)

## SIMPLE OCTAVE SLUR EXERCISE



(Tutorial videos and more advanced exercises can be found at <https://www.helenblackburn.com>. See: **Super Duper Zen Yoga Warmups and Videos**)

## TEACH ALL THREE FINGERINGS FOR Bb

Teach all three fingerings for Bb in the first year! There is no “right” or “wrong” fingering for Bb; it’s a matter of context and mechanical efficiency.

- **Thumb Bb (TBb):**
  - Use anytime key signature has 1-5 flats.
  - Do **not** use TBb in key signatures with no flats or for the chromatic scale.
  - Do **not** roll thumb from Bb to B-natural.
- **Lever Bb (L):**
  - Introduce lever when you teach the chromatic scale.
  - Use in **B Major, F# Major, and Gb Major keys/scales.**

- Lever is almost *always* the best (most efficient) fingering for A# because it requires fewer keys on the flute to move (which produces quieter, more fluent technique).
- Lever is great for G - Bb - B-natural passages (and their enharmonic equivalents).
- Use lever for any chromatic scale or when B-natural and Bb occur side-by-side.
- **One & One Bb (1&1):**
  - 1&1 is great for F - Bb - B-natural passages or any passage in which RH1 is down preceding Bb - B-natural.
- **In general:**
  - Thumb should be on the Bb side if the key signature has 1-5 flats.
  - Thumb should be on the B-natural side if the key signature does not have flats. (Or if the key sig. has 6+ flats.)
  - Thumb Bb and Lever Bb will be used much more frequently than 1&1 Bb *when the flute mechanism is used efficiently.*
  - ***Insist that all flutists understand and correctly use all 3 Bb flat fingerings by the end of the first year!***

### **FINGERING FELONIES**

Insist that your students use all the *correct* fingerings. No cheating!

- Left hand 1st finger (LH1) ***must*** be up for middle D, Eb, and high Bb.
- F# must be fingered with RH3 (ring finger), ***not*** RH2 (middle finger)!
- Right hand pinky (RH4) must be down for E-natural in the low and middle registers.
- Teach the ***real (correct) fingerings*** first! Do not teach “RH down” on middle C#, or “special” 3rd octave fingerings such as “pinky up” on High E-natural, “plus RH3” (forked F) on high F, etc. during the 1st year. It is ***crucial*** for optimal technical development that students learn the ***standard*** fingerings the first year.

### **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

In our experience, students can learn fingerings with a good fingering chart, a small amount of guidance, and a bit of curiosity, but in order for them to learn to play with correct embouchure and airstream, *the teacher* must be able to teach and model the following 2 important skills on the flute:

1. The first sounds on the headjoint
2. A proper octave slur

Reminder: Fundamentals of posture, hand position, breathing, embouchure, articulation, and rhythm are the most important concepts for students to master in the first year!

***Technique will come easily if you go slowly and methodically in the beginning.***

## **A BASIC TIMELINE**

This will depend on many variables (class size, progress of individual students, etc.). We certainly expect each teacher to supplement, experiment, and be flexible, but this is a very basic timeline of the order in which we might teach fundamental flute skills.

- I. **Week 1-3**
  - A. Intro to note & rhythm reading
  - B. Sitting and standing posture
  - C. Breathing
  - D. Flute assembly (with the headjoint pre-marked by the teacher)
  - E. Pneumo Pro work, blowing on hand for air direction, or grain of rice (Suzuki-influenced) method
  - F. Finding “sweet spot” on headjoint (with mirror)
  - G. Long tones on headjoint
  - H. Introduce articulation
  - I. Holding the flute resting on the shoulder
- II. **Early Fall**
  - A. Introduce cleaning & maintenance
  - B. Headjoint work (with mirror)
  - C. Headjoint rhythm reading (improvised call & response with teacher)
  - D. Finger exercises/games
  - E. Introduce notes B-A-G-F on assembled flute (or just headjoint and body...no footjoint) with mirror
  - F. LOTS of long tones
- III. **Mid Fall**
  - A. Introduce fingering chart
  - B. Begin tetrachords/mini scales
  - C. Teach all three B-flat fingerings
  - D. Octave slurs (starting on low F - ascending chromatically)
  - E. Introduce double tongue exercise on one note
  - F. Introduce low E, Eb, D (emphasis on placement of first finger)
  - G. Developing a daily warmup/routine
- IV. **Late Fall**
  - A. Begin vibrato
  - B. Continue chromatic octave slurs (low E - high Eb)
  - C. Introduce one-octave scale
- V. **Early Spring**
  - A. Continue vibrato - adding rhythm
  - B. Reviewing octave slurs (low E - high Eb)
  - C. Expand double tongue exercise
- VI. **Mid Spring**
  - A. Continue to expand double tongue exercise
  - B. Octave slurs ascending chromatic (low D - high Ab)
  - C. Introduce free rhythm vibrato

## **RECOMMENDED METHOD BOOKS AND PRINT MATERIALS FOR BEGINNERS**

- Flute 101 – Mastering the Basics by Phyllis Louke and Patricia George (great for supplementing band method books) ([link here](#))
- Blocki Flute Method Book by Kathy Blocki and Rebecca Hovan (Teacher’s Manual and Student Book One - great for supplementing band method books) ([link here](#))
- Flute Class by Trevor Wye (great for supplementing band method books) ([link here](#))
- The Gilbert Legacy by Angeleita Floyd (wonderful pedagogy book with pictures and clear explanations of and solutions for common flute problems) ([link here](#))

## **RECOMMENDED FLUTES FOR BEGINNERS**

We recommend starting all beginners on **open-hole** flutes with an **off-set G key**. The open holes encourage good hand position, and the off-set G is more ergonomically suited to the shape of the left hand. Silicon plugs may be used for the ring finger on both hands if the player is too small to cover the open holes in the beginning. A **split-E mechanism** is becoming more common on beginner model instruments and helps stabilize high E-natural.

We have had good experience with these beginner flutes:

- DiZhao DZ-201
- Yamaha YFL-262
- Trevor James 12XC

## **HAVE FUN!**

Building a strong foundation on flute takes time, patience, and attention to detail. Your students will feed off your enthusiasm and energy, so don't forget to have fun! Helping your students enjoy this process will help them foster a growth mindset and a love of learning. This will both benefit the students in music (as well as all aspects of life) and make your job easier and more enjoyable, too!

Helen Blackburn and Megan Seymore, June 2021

Additional editing, formatting, and general brilliant contributions by Katie Worsham and notational skills by Vesselin Todorov. Thank you!