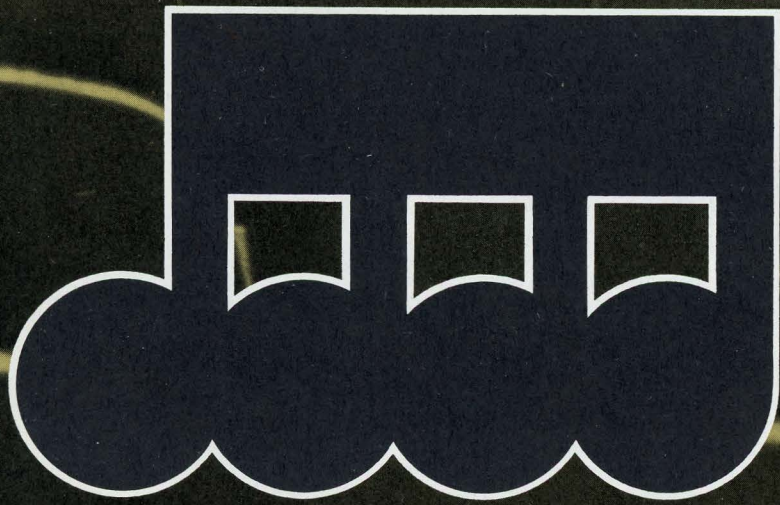


the

# flute

## PRACTICE TECHNIQUES

by Robert H. Willoughby





# the flute

Any discussion of how to practice must place particular emphasis on the importance of concentration. Ideally, a person would be so involved in music-making that he would be oblivious to the passage of time. Probably all of us have experienced the sensation of having been startled by a sudden noise which brought us out of an almost hypnotic state of intense concentration. Unless you put everything else completely out of your mind you are simply not making the most efficient use of your time.

Varying your practice routine is important in keeping the music fresh. Once you have completed your warm-up, try beginning with basic technical material (scales, thirds, etc.), one day, studies the next day and a piece the third day. Make a point of commencing work on a different part of whatever piece you're playing. If you find yourself getting bogged down, perhaps mentally fatigued, take a five minute break and you will usually return rejuvenated. To make any real progress, once you are beyond the elementary stage, requires a minimum of one hour's practice per day, which of course can be split into half hour sessions. For the conservatory student preparing himself for a position in a symphony orchestra, three to four hours practice per day is necessary, and in this case it is advisable to plan on more than one session in order to remain mentally alert.

Practicing in front of a mirror can pay big dividends in a number of ways. Do you sway about so much that it is distracting to the listener? Do you



move your flute on every beat or every downbeat so that the note is accented? (To break this bad habit, deliberately make a large movement on every beat, then every other beat, then every fourth beat, and finally cease beating entirely.) Do you keep your fingers close to the keys? (Practice lifting each finger very slowly without leaving the key — watch particularly the G# key in general and the D key when playing F.) Are your lips parallel to the embouchure plate? (If not, you run the danger of playing out of the side of your mouth, with decreased efficiency.) Close observation of yourself in a mirror while practicing can help you cope with these problems. In addition it serves as an aid in making any embouchure changes your teacher deems advisable.



It is important to stand with your weight distributed evenly on both legs, because standing on only one foot inhibits freedom of the diaphragm. Also it is preferable to breathe before you have completely exhausted your breath supply. For one thing, it is difficult to maintain a steady air pressure at the very end of a breath and you run a real danger of noisily gasping in air if you wait too long. It is far better to breathe unobtrusively more often.

I strongly advocate practicing part of the time without vibrato. While it adds life to your playing, it also tends to obscure basic faults, such as lack of support. In addition, modern composers will often specifically request that a particular passage be played without vibrato. Likewise in baroque music it should be used sparingly.

Balance can be a real problem on the flute, not only between registers, but also between tongued and slurred, as well as long and short notes. To cope with the first of these problems it is helpful to practice scales forte in the low register, mezzo forte in the middle register and mezzo piano in the high register. Part of this compensation is necessary because the flute sound becomes brighter as you ascend. Once you have balanced scale passages, try balancing larger intervals. One good way to practice this is to take a particular interval, say a descending fifth, and fill it in thus:

CHROMATIC

SCALE

THIRD

FIFTH

When you crescendo, you should drop the jaw to avoid going sharp, and, of course, this is the same motion you normally make when you go from an upper to a lower note. You will observe that when you descend chromatically your jaw moves slightly on each note. Now the trick is to keep this jaw movement the same as you progress to a scale and third pattern and finally to the interval of the fifth itself. In other words, the jaw gradually drops on the upper note as you crescendo and only when you have reached your peak do you move to the lower note. Of course, the whole process is reversed when the interval is up instead of down.

There are two important exceptions to the normal rule of *jaw forward and up as you ascend, jaw down and back as you descend*. First, because of the tendency of the high register to be sharp in forte passages, we must drop the jaw when we play loudly up there. Secondly, the notes from E down to C in the bottom register tend to be flat, so unless you are playing forte, it is necessary to come forward with the jaw on these notes.

Balancing tongued and slurred notes is largely a matter of blowing sufficiently through notes which we tongue. Practicing tongueless attacks





(hoo) is most helpful, gradually adding the tongue without diminishing the breath. Another possibility is to practice tonguing without the flute and make the breath felt on your hand some two feet in front of you.

Long notes, normally played with vibrato, will sound louder than moving notes. To compensate for this, try adding one dynamic level to the moving notes and in order to have a feeling of connection, make a slight crescendo from the long to the moving notes.

When you approach a composition, the first step to take is to analyze the music. Figure out its form and what period and style it represents, because you must have a reason for playing as you do. Then pick out the important parts and emphasize them, just as you naturally de-emphasize the unimportant parts. How do you determine just what is important? One way is to practice from the score (piano part) so that you can see everything that is happening, particularly in a sonata, where the flute and piano play an equal role. Look for a melodic line in the piano part to see if the flute part is secondary at that point. And, of

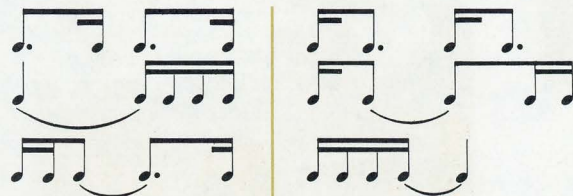


course, the complexity of the piano part gives a good indication of the correct tempo for a movement. If you

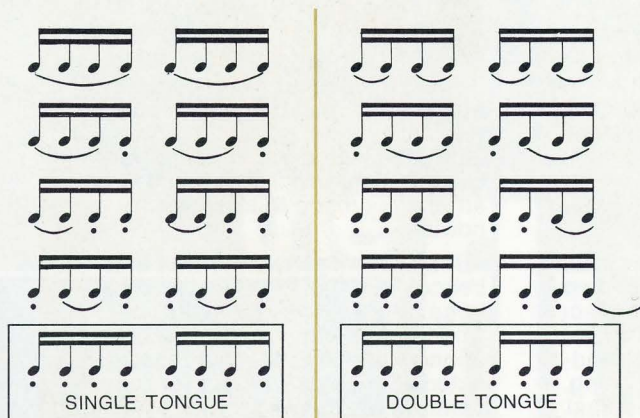
are able to play the piano part yourself, even if only the bass line, you will have a better understanding of the makeup of the piece. Failing that, try playing the bass line on the flute.

You can save a good deal of time and come out with a better balanced performance if you will concentrate your practice on the passages which are most difficult, rather than simply ploughing through a piece from beginning to end. When you encounter a difficult 16th note figure, try breaking it up into groups of no more than four. (For example, twelve notes could be broken into three groups of four or four of three, eleven into a group of three and two groups of four, ten into two groups of three and a group of four, etc.) It helps to organize the groups if you slightly lengthen the first note of each group. Practice the run ascending and descending, both as a whole and in sections.

Play it in different rhythms.  
For example:



Practice with different articulations, using groups of four sixteenth notes as shown below:



It is usually helpful to think of the fast notes as being slow. Take your time in a difficult passage, for the tendency is to rush it. And it's a good idea never to play a passage faster than you can comfortably handle it, even if it means temporarily slowing down specific areas. In this way you build your confidence. Sometimes it is advisable to drop a piece of music for awhile and come back to it later. Passages which seemed almost impossible at first often become more manageable on a second working through.

When first working on a piece, it's best to play it strictly in time (but not necessarily up to tempo) then, as you become more familiar with it, begin to take appropriate liberties. You should always be able to return to playing it exactly as notated.



Dynamics is an area where we as flutists are particularly vulnerable. How often one hears an otherwise respectable performance where the dynamic range is mp-mf, with an occasional forte in the high register. Exaggerate your dynamics when practicing, not only in your pieces but also in scales, thirds, etc. Run the complete gamut of possibilities.



Unfortunately most of us play for years satisfied with the pitch of whatever note comes out as we depress certain specified keys, to the point that when we actually play in tune it may very well sound wrong to us. Careful comparison with a piano will help us become more aware of pitch problems, but even better is the use of a stroboscope. (We are dealing with the tempered scale, of course.) Middle register C and C# and most of the high register will tend to be quite sharp when played forte, and low register C through E, as well as middle D# and E, often will be flat in soft passages.

Perhaps a few tips about memorization would be helpful. Analysis of a composition (form, scale or chordal patterns, etc.) is an obvious first step. Then you might try dividing the piece into sections. Make sure you can begin each section without need of a lead-in from the part immediately preceding, for example by starting with the final section of the movement and working toward the beginning. Note carefully any changes when a theme is

repeated. After long hours of practice your fingers will almost automatically play the right notes, but you would be well advised to have other methods of memorization as a backup. Performers achieve a visual image of the page to varying degrees, the extreme being the person who can visualize the notes on a whole page after a single perusal. Another device which can be used is to play the flute part on the piano or to sing it with the names of the notes.



Performing often, even if in front of only two or three of your colleagues, will make you feel more at ease and add to your confidence.

And remember, how you look and act on stage has a definite bearing on the audience's reaction to you. Entrances and exits, especially for ensembles, should be rehearsed and an attempt made to synchronize bowing.

It all boils down to the fact that becoming a first class flutist is, to a large degree, simply a matter of working out all these various aspects of one's playing until they become automatic. Then you can really concentrate on "making music", confident that your intonation, technique, etc. are all contributing to a good performance.

## Robert H. Willoughby

*Professor of Flute at the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music, with which he has been associated since 1949, Mr. Willoughby was formerly solo flutist of the Cincinnati Symphony and assistant first flutist of the Cleveland Orchestra. A graduate of both the Eastman School of Music and the New England Conservatory of Music, he also studied for several summers with William Kincaid. From 1966-69 he was solo flutist at the Dartmouth College Congregation of the Arts. In addition to his teaching, Mr. Willoughby is a member of the Oberlin Woodwind Quintet, the Oberlin Baroque Ensemble and the Pro Arte Orchestra of Oberlin. He has recorded for Coronet Records, both as soloist and with the Oberlin Woodwind Quintet.*



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