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# Beginning Flute Pedagogy

Sabrina Simone

*The University of Akron*, [sabrinasilicone.m@gmail.com](mailto:sabrinasilicone.m@gmail.com)

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Beginning Flute Pedagogy

Sabrina M. Simone

The University of Akron

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This paper explores materials from four published and recommended books, experienced flute educators, and reputable music collections to create a basic guideline for the private flute lesson teacher. The topics and materials presented will be the outline for guiding a beginning flute player to success as they increase in ability through secondary education. This includes instructions on playing position, tone production, and techniques for helping develop a proficient player. Common problems with solutions will also be suggested along with teaching materials. The focus will be mainly on beginning instruction because creating a solid foundation is imperative for success. An important issue to keep in mind during instruction is every student is different and has specific needs. Therefore, slight adjustments to the given information may be needed for individuals. A comprehensive list of materials for use in teaching will be supplied at the end for educators to reference. However, there are also many other materials for possible instructional use that may not be provided due to the large volume of available resources.

The first lesson with a student is very critical because it builds the foundation for all future knowledge to stem from. The student will most likely be eager to start playing the instrument right away, but the teacher should help the student slow down and understand the importance of proper playing position and taking care of the flute. Hopefully the student has not yet attempted to teach themselves for this very reason. Even if the student has, starting from the very beginning is necessary to make sure no bad habits are formed.

Begin instruction by placing the flute case right side up on a flat, sturdy surface. It is a good idea to not have the student open the case in their lap incase an accident happens that could potentially cause harm. All cases are made differently so make sure that the student has placed it right side up and give them a trick to remember it by. Sometimes there might be a logo on the case or the student may choose to put a sticker on the side that faces up. This is important so that

the parts of the flute stay in their designated spot when the case is opened. The teacher should now address each part of the instrument individually. Have the student point to each part of the instrument with the instructor and say their proper names (head joint, body, and foot joint). Make the student aware that there is a cork in the top of the head joint that should not be touched. Along with this, the crown at the top of the head joint should not be messed with even though it may be tempting to screw or unscrew. Make special note that the rods and keys on the body and foot joint are fragile. These parts should be picked up out of the case with one hand on each end, not touching the keys, in order to keep the mechanisms from bending.

From this point it is suggested by Judith Hall, music education graduate from The Ohio State University and private lesson teacher of over thirty years, to not assemble the instrument yet, but to start on the head joint only. By not even showing the student how to assemble the instrument during the first lesson it forces them to focus on achieving a good embouchure and tone (J. Hall, personal communication, August 24, 2016). Have the student carefully remove the head joint with both hands and sit in a chair next to the teacher. Before any playing takes place, proper posture and its importance should be covered. While explaining posture, model for the student so that a visual is provided. This includes: moving to the edge of the chair, feet flat on the floor, a straight back, shoulders pulled back and relaxed, and chest up. Also explain to the student that everything remains the same while standing. Have the student attempt this by standing straight up from their sitting position without moving the upper body alignment.

The student is now ready to begin learning proper formation of the embouchure. The teacher should be the first one to place the lip plate on the student so that their aperture hole is aligned in the center horizontally and vertically. The student should then be told to relax their mouth in order to alleviate any tension. According to Jane Berkner, Professor of flute for almost

twenty years, a good way to achieve a loose and flexible embouchure is to start by having the student simply say “poo” into the instrument (J. Berkner, personal communication, March, 2013). This helps to attain a looser and fleshier lower lip. Never compare the flute embouchure to a smile because this does the opposite by stretching the bottom lip straight back, or possibly down. Make the student aware that only part of their air is going to be directed into the instrument. When the head joint is aligned properly with the embouchure a triangle of condensation is formed on the opposite side of the lip plate. This is a neat trick to let the student know about so that they are practicing correctly at home. The use of a mirror whenever possible will also aid the student in visually seeing their placement and if any adjustments need to be made. The teacher should not talk much more about the embouchure at first and allow the student to blow and attempt to produce a sound.

The embouchure is of prime importance in achieving a quality tone on the flute. Covering too much of the embouchure hole with the lower lip results in a tone that is small and thin in quality, but by not covering enough, the tone tends to be empty or shallow in quality (Putnik, 1980). The teacher can fix these common problems by making small adjustments to the placement. To cover more of the hole, the head joint should be moved down on the lips or turned in and to cover less of the hole, it should be rolled out. All of these adjustments are relative to the angle of the air stream as well. One way to have the student gain control over their airstream is to hold their hand in front of them and experiment with blowing air from the tips of the fingers to the bottom of the palm. Consider what is happening to the lips, teeth, and jaw during this. Replace the head joint on the student’s embouchure and have them slowly change the angle of the air stream in this same fashion. Once the spot is found where good tone is produced, tell the student to remember what that position physically felt like. A good way to practice finding this

spot is to entirely cover the hole with the lips and then roll the head joint down into position. The student might discover that when their air stream is angled up, a higher pitch is produced, or that when the air stream is angled down, a lower pitch is produced. Discussion of the different octaves may be held at this time and the student should be encouraged to achieve these different pitches.

Breath support will be a major factor in whether or not the student is successful in achieving a quality tone as well. It is not bad to tell a student to take a deep breath and fill up their diaphragm with air, however, the student most likely either does not fully understand this or it does not resonate with them deep enough to make an impactful connection (Toff, 2012). Instead, use good visuals such as relating taking a deep breath to filling up a glass with water. This will help the student fill their entire body with air from the bottom up. In order to keep the throat open and not restricted, have the student yawn or imagine that there is a hard-boiled egg sitting on the back of their tongue. There are many other common breathing problems that could potentially cause harm if not addressed right away. First, always make sure that the student is breathing through their mouth and not their nose. This might seem like an obvious fact to an experienced musician because it is second nature, but to a beginning student it may not be. Second, pay attention to what happens to the student's body as they take a deep breath. The shoulders should not rise up and the back should not hunch over. Bring the student's attention to the fact that when a deep breath is taken, the spine actually shortens, and as they exhale it expands. This is the opposite of what one might think and is good reason to stay tall and remain in correct posture while releasing air into the instrument. One last problem that may occur is throwing the entire head back to open the mouth to breathe. In this situation, tell the student to

drop their jaw and let the air come to them instead (J. Berkner, personal communication, March, 2013).

Now that the student has achieved proper playing position and an embouchure with good breathing practices to produce a quality tone, the first lesson will soon be coming to an end. Some students may not actually be able to produce a tone, therefore much work will have needed to be spent working on finding the proper placement for the embouchure. For those who are successful, there will be time to experiment with the different octaves on the head joint that they may have produced earlier. There are many different ways to go about this, but establishing a steady beat should be the underlying goal. The teacher should model quarter, half, and whole notes for the student on the different head joint pitches and have the student repeat the pattern back. Always keep an audible steady beat going, whether it be with a metronome, clapping, or any other method. This will engrain the sense of time into the student's playing from the very beginning. The student might not already know how to read music either, but there is no need for this the first lesson. If the student learns by sound first, there will be more meaning behind the rhythms when they are seen written for the first time. The student should spend their first week, at least, on just the head joint practicing. If the student was very successful during their first lesson, demonstrate how putting the right palm over the end of the head joint creates a lower sound. Also demonstrate how sliding the index finger in and out of the head joint carefully creates a slide whistle affect. Have the student try this with teacher supervision and then do them during practice at home for fun. One more thing that can be done is attaching the foot joint of the flute to the head joint. This makes it possible to play three other pitches with the foot joint keys. Inform the student that they will never actually play the flute like this, but it is just another way

to practice embouchure, breathing, tone, and posture while creating different pitches (J. Hall, personal communication, August 24, 2016).

No more than this is necessary to be done playing wise at the first lesson. Have the student carefully set the parts back in the case and look for a cleaning rod that may have been supplied. Inform the student that it is important to keep moisture from sitting inside the instrument and it must be swabbed out after every time it is played. Show them the proper technique for their specific cleaning rod and then locate their polishing cloth if they have one. It is a good idea to first show the student how to clean both the inside and outside of their instrument before having them try it so that they have a model to follow. If the student does not have a cleaning rod or polishing cloth, direct them to a local music store to purchase one. The student can now place the head joint and cleaning items back in the case so that it closes correctly and will not damage the flute. This is plenty information for the first lesson and gives the student multiple items to work on at home.

Progression of the next few lessons will depend on how quickly the student is able to be successful with the previously discussed topics. It is good to spend a couple of weeks on just the head joint but some students may need even more than that. Starting with the method book “Flute 101: Mastering the Basics” by Louke and George is a great tool because the first two pages are dedicated to head joint work only. There are plenty of exercises here to keep the player engaged if they may be having a hard time with basic tone production and embouchure formation. There are many useful playing tips and teacher suggestions given at the tops of the pages throughout this book as well.

Once the student is comfortable enough with the head joint alone, it is time to show them how to properly assemble and hold the entire instrument. Remind the student to always pick up

each piece by the ends and to not squeeze the keys while lightly twisting the joints together.

Inform the student that the problem of bending keys or rods can be avoided by following this step. Show them how the embouchure hole on the head joint is directly in line with the first key on the body of the flute. The teacher may choose to mark the student's flute with something that is not permanent, such as nail polish, so that the student achieves the correct position of the head joint every time. As the student develops, this mark will need to be moved slightly and placed in the best spot for that student's embouchure (J. Berkner, personal communication, March, 2013). Having this mark right away avoids the common problem of students playing with the head joint extremely rolled in or rolled out. When this happens, the student is forced to compensate for the incorrect alignment by rotating the flute in or out with the hands, which results in awkward and unsteady hand position (Putnik, 1980). It is also important that the rod of the foot joint is in line with the middle of the last key (D) on the body. A common problem is that many students will want to keep the rods in line on the body and foot joint, but this leads to the pinky key being too far down and not being able to depress the keys. Some students may have the opposite problem and be over extending their pinky to reach the key because the foot joint is rolled too far forward. The teacher should always be watching for these issues and making the necessary adjustments on the student's flute so that the correct playing habits are solidified.

Proper playing position and hand position are also very important and the teacher should constantly be reminding the student to maintain these. Hand position can be tricky and there are many common issues that may occur if the student is not kept accountable. First, inform the student that the left hand will be closest to them on the top of the flute and the right hand will be farther away on the bottom of the flute. This may not feel natural at first, especially if the student is right handed. Now demonstrate how the hands should be placed on the instrument and direct

the student to model it one hand at a time. This will probably be easiest if the flute is angled so that it is resting across the left shoulder and onto the right knee. Starting with the left hand, the thumb should be placed on the B natural key and the left index finger wrapped around the flute for stability. Help the student to place their first three fingers on the appropriate keys. Always make sure to address the fact that there is a key skipped over between the first and second finger. This is something to pay close attention to because at first the student may be inclined to move the fingers so that they are all three in a row. The left pinky then should rest on the Ab key, not hang below it. This is also a common problem that will happen because the key does not get used much at first. However, this leads to a bad habit and the pinky not being ready to play the note when it is needed, especially in faster passages. Moving onto the right hand, the thumb should be directly under the index finger which is placed on the F key. On this hand the fingers are placed directly next to each other on the keys with the pinky reaching for the Eb key. A very common problem with this hand is that the thumb will tend to stick out too far or slide down on the flute. This can cause the pinky to collapse or be straight, which is incorrect because all fingers should be curved. If this is a serious issue that the student cannot seem to fix, a thumb port can be attached to the instrument to aid in correction. Again, all fingers should be curved so that they can easily be placed on top of the keys with the pads of the fingers in the center. This will become very important when the student starts playing on an open-keyed flute in order to cover the holes. The fingers should also remain as close to the keys as possible in order to play quickly, do not allow the fingers fly off of the flute as the student is playing (Ruby- Kushious, 2014). With hands set properly, the student can move the arms into playing position off to the right side of the body. The student should maintain the same posture addressed in the first lesson with flute parallel to the ground and elbows bent naturally away from the body. The wrists should be

straight and flexible without any tension. The student should have a light grip on the flute and not be squeezing it because this too will cause tension issues.

The student is now ready to start learning how to work the mechanisms of the flute in order to produce different pitches. One thing that the teacher should realize throughout this process is that it can be tiring for younger students to hold the previously discussed playing position and posture for long periods of time. They have not yet developed the muscles and will tend to fall out of the posture quickly. For this reason it is suggested that the student practices in several short time frames of about fifteen to twenty minutes to start off with (Putnik, 1980). As for beginning methods, a few good books are: *Flute 101: Mastering the Basics* by Louke and George, *Learn to Play the Flute* by Jacobs, and the *Peterson Rubank Elementary Method*. They all begin with the student learning the notes B, A, and G on the staff. Some of the tunes are similar and some are different, but which method book that is chosen may depend on the student's personality. They would also be very helpful to supplement each other with as the student progresses through their first year.

By this point the student has been producing sound on the flute for a good amount of time without use of articulation. Other teachers may have chosen to introduce the tongue at an earlier stage, but there is also reason to wait. According to Jane Berkner, spending a lot of time without using the tongue at first is good because it helps with air support and for the student to separate the difference between the air and the tongue. It is important that the student realizes these are separate entities so that the tongue does not affect the air. To transition the student to using the tongue, back track to having the student say "poo" into the instrument. Now change the front consonant and have the student say "too." This should place the tongue right where it needs to be, behind the back of the top teeth where the roof of the mouth and gums meet. Tell the student

to feel where the tongue hits and describe it. The tongue should always remain crisp and light. The student may let the tongue become lazy causing for a muffled attack, correct immediately and do not let this become habit. As the student advances, experiment with different ways to tongue such as saying "dew" into the instrument for a legato articulation (J. Berkner, personal communication, March, 2013). The student will also eventually be introduced to double and triple tonguing. For double tonguing have the student say "ta-ka" and for triple tonguing say "ta-ka-too" or "ta-ka-ta." During the "ka" part of the saying the back of the tongue should be articulating the note (Ruby- Kushious, 2014). Commonly at first the part of the articulation that is played with the tip of the tongue will be stronger than the one played with the back of the tongue. The student should work very slowly during this time to create an even flow. The teacher may also have the student play unevenly in order to hear the difference of the sound. Students can practice these articulations with scales, but the method book "243 Double Tonguing and Triple Tonguing Exercises" by Victor Salva is a great way to begin using the different types of tonguing in context.

The last important technique of instruction to be discussed is that of vibrato. This should not be introduced to the student until all other fundamentals are solid and they can sustain long notes with a good sound. Judith Hall stated that generally she will teach this technique after the student has been playing for a year or two, depending on their progress. Up until now, the student has been playing with primarily a pure tone, but by adding this technique into their playing it will help them achieve a more musical and mature sound. Vibrato should initially come from the diaphragm and can be related to the same motion used to say "ha-ha-ha," like laughter, or a dog panting. Heidi Ruby-Kushious suggests starting the student off with saying short "ha's" and then bringing them closer together. Once this has been mastered, the vibrato

will become natural and will flow evenly without feeling like a machine pumping. Judith Hall also suggests having the students play with counted vibrato at first. This entails putting a certain number of vibrato cycles per beat. The advantage of this method is so that the student gains control over how fast or slow the vibrato sounds. The method book “Flute 102: Mastering the Basics” introduces vibrato this way and includes various exercises. This prevents the issue of students not being able to control their vibrato speed so that it will fit the emotional aspect of a piece of music. There are a couple more common issues that may occur and should be controlled right away. The student may try to create the vibrato by use of the throat, resulting in a very fast “goat imitation” that causes tension (Toff, 2012). This must be avoided at all cost because tension in the throat will restrict the sound resulting in a less than desirable tone. Make sure that the student keeps the vibrato low in the diaphragm so that the throat can remain open providing a rich, deep sound. Techniques for opening the throat include yawning or imagining that a hard-boiled egg is resting on the back of the tongue. One final topic of concern is to make sure that the student can still play with a pure tone. Judith Hall mentioned that often students will come to her and be stuck in the habit of always playing with vibrato, not being able to take it out. The student should be made aware that vibrato is a tool used to make music more interesting. If every note always has vibrato, then the technique loses its effect. The teacher can fix this issue before it even starts by having the student only play certain exercises or notes of pieces with vibrato.

Besides the use of method books, teachers should utilize other materials for student growth. This includes scales, duets, etudes, solos, and other supplemental materials. It is important that the student plays a wide variety of music at all times so that they are challenged in different technical and musical aspects. Following this paper is a comprehensive list of possible materials for use that have been successful during instruction. There is a suggested timeline laid

out, but the student may progress more slowly or quickly depending on the individual. Once the student enters seventh grade, solo and ensemble music will most likely be of main focus during a few months of the school year. The teacher should pick a few solos within the student's technical abilities that will challenge them and then allow the student to pick their favorite one. It is important that the student is fond of the piece because they will be working on it for a good amount of time.

The whole experience of learning and growing in flute playing should be an enjoyable experience for both the teacher and the student. Over the years a strong student-teacher relationship will form and the student will trust advice given by the teacher, really taking all compliments and criticism to heart. If the foundation of the fundamentals is soundly drilled into the student from the beginning, the student will appreciate it in the end. The success of the student will be more frequent and there will be less or no bad habits to keep from improving even farther into the future.

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