

Why not extend your palette with tone-bending? By Dean Stallard

The advantages of practicing tone-bending should be so obvious that it is almost unnecessary to list them. However, I've never been shy of stating the obvious and you never know, someone might want enlightening 😊

The Boehm flute, contrary to popular opinion is not an instrument of fixed pitch in the same way as the piano. This might seem strange as there is so much discussion about various flute scales and how they measure up to the tempered system, but because of factors involving the embouchure, air speed and blowing angle there is no guarantee that a certain finger combination will give an exact pitch.

The tempered scale is, in reality, a compromise that allows instruments of a fixed pitch to play reasonably well in tune, in any key. Having a flute with a good scale gives you a good comfort zone where you can play in tune, in any key with a good sound.

Practicing tone-bending will help you to discover where this comfort zone is and improve your sound.

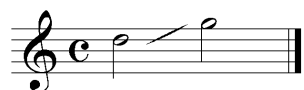
So now you can play in tune with a piano (well reasonably well 😊), but because the tempered system is a compromise there are very few wind or string players that stick to it when released from the constraints of a pianist. Being musical people they will instinctively adjust the tuning to what feels "right".

This brings us to the position that being "in tune" is a subjective, rather than a definitive state. Whether you are in tune or not depends on which note you are playing, what the context of that note is and whom you are playing with. What it says on your digital-tuner is neither here nor there, if 30 violinists have together raised the pitch and say that you are playing flat, then you are!

Practicing tone-bending will extend your comfort zone, allowing you the flexibility to stay in tune, no matter what the circumstances (well, at least within reasonable limits) without your sound quality deteriorating overly.

Speaking of the comfort zone, you need to be sure that your flute is set up correctly before you move on. Only in this way will you be able to play centred to the flute's scale and have the flexibility needed available to you. Check the cork position and use the exercise I gave you in Harmonics part 2, Flutewise issue 56, to check your head-joint position.

When you first start tone-bending you might at first find it difficult to make any real impact on the note involved. Persevere, don't worry too much about the sound quality at first, just concentrate on raising or lowering the note. I find that the best notes for starting are somewhere in this range;



Choose the note that you feel is best for you, one that you can play with a good solid sound.

Try to raise the pitch of this note by;

1. Pushing your jaw and lips forward.
2. Raising the angle and speed of the air-stream
3. Turning the flute out

Some of you will of course realise that points 1-3 are pretty closely related. The point is to work on each point carefully and in isolation from the others, so as to be objective about what

the effect is on pitch and tone quality. Once you have achieved some success, combine all 3 to make the greatest difference possible, again not worrying too much about the sound quality right now.

Now do the opposite of all the above and try to lower the pitch as much as possible.

Try to do the same with other notes in the range I have given you. Do only a couple of minutes each day and to avoid tiring your lips in the first week or so, don't move outside of this range.

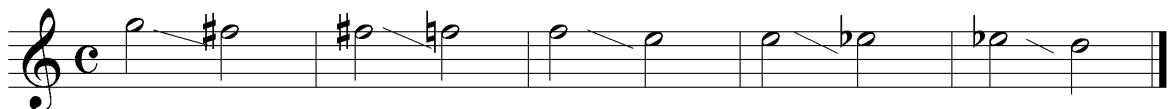
Once you can bend the notes between D2-G2 up and down a little, employ the help of a flute-playing friend and try this duet;



“Merrily we roll along” from “The Fife Book” by Liz Goodwin (pub. Just Flutes)

A bit piquant isn't it? The idea is to bend the notes so that you are playing in unison. Swap parts so that you both take turns at bending notes up or down. This should be quite easy if you are both bending notes as you don't need to bend more than a quarter-tone each.

Now try this standard sonority exercise, but instead of moving your fingers for the second note, bend the first note down;



Check the tuning of the second note in each bar (measure) against the first note in the next. Try to bend it a whole semi-tone down so that the next note, played in the standard way, is at the same pitch. Once you reach D2, reverse the process and move back up to G2, bending the second note up.

Again, don't over do it, bending notes up can be tiring. Gradually extend your range beyond G2 and D2.

Finally an artistic use for tone-bending;



Play the final Ab (marked *) with a Bb fingering and then bend it back up to Bb. Those who did their homework on harmonics will realise that all of the above can be played on the left hand only, which is why I just love those blues in Bb!!