

Why not extend your palette with special effects? Part 3 By Dean Stallard

In this final article we will look at some ways to make percussive effects on your flute. Of course the easiest way to make percussive sounds on a flute would be to hit it with a hammer, but that gets expensive and isn't sustainable for more than a few beats!☺

Slap Tongue

It is natural that the first effect we look at should have something in common with the last. The effect you are after here is a sort of explosive residual tone.

Without your flute set the tip of your tongue between your lips. Some of you might already recognise this as preparing for a “French” articulation, or what Suzuki children learn as “spitting rice”. However what we are after is a much more violent effect than a regular articulation and the tongue should protrude a bit, rather than it's more normal position just touching the back of the lips.

Build up the air behind your tongue so that you feel pressure in your mouth. Now suddenly shoot your tongue back into your mouth, at the same time as opening your mouth like a goldfish! You should hear a loud pop if you do it right. Once you can manage this try it with your flute in position.

You should get an explosive articulation that sounds the note you are fingering, although it will be rich in upper harmonics and difficult to distinguish which octave you were playing. Right after the note there should also be a slight residual tone that helps give the effect of an exact pitch.

Play around with slap tonguing on this blues scale to get some idea of how you might use it. Slap tongue is possible throughout the first 2 registers of the flute and a little into the 3rd.



Tongue Ram

With my younger pupils I call this “arrows” as the effect you are after should sound something like an arrow being shot into a target. Well at least a Hollywood, Robin Hood arrow☺

Cover the flute embouchure with your lips as though you are going to play a jet whistle. Start blowing and gradually increase the air pressure, finally shooting the tip of your tongue into the blow hole. If you do this slowly you should hear the whistle of the arrow approaching the target, followed by a “dunk” as it hits home.

This final “dunk” will be an exact pitch but be advised it is not the pitch you are fingering. The pitch heard will be a minor 7th below what you are expecting**. If you have difficulty working that out, just think one scale step above what you are fingering, but sounding an octave lower.

Play a simple tune like “Merrily we roll along” to get the feel of the tongue ram effect.

Tongue rams are only really effective on the first octave of the flute (composers take note!!)

Key Click/Slap

Two names that are synonymous, the latter describing the action the former the sound. As implied you create a percussive click by slapping the keys. I find however that you get a much better and more precise effect if you only slap one key for each note rather than several.

Finger for example an F. Now raise your left long finger as though you are going to play a high F, then slap it back down on the key to give a click that sounds at around the pitch of an F. (I find that using a finger in the middle of the flute length used* is often much more effective than slapping with the last finger in the fingering.) I say “around” the pitch because the tuning of the click will be affected by whether or not you have the flute in playing position and how much of the blow-hole your lip is covering. Less of the hole covered means a higher note and more covered flattens the note. If you completely block the hole with your tongue then you will end up with the same pitches you did on tongue rams**.

This means that key clicks work effectively over the first octave of the flute but that this range can be extended to nearly an octave below. At the upper end of the first octave you will find that both C and C# are quite ineffective, so that to all extents and purposes the effective range of key clicks is B and downwards (again composers take note). Weaker key clicks can be helped by a little shot of air across the blowhole. You can also use a key click in regular playing to help on one of those sluggish low notes for a fast response. Again playing around with simple melodies will help you get the feel for this effect.

Finally.....

I hope you have enjoyed my articles and found them useful. There must of course be lots more techniques out there we could look at, it has been my intention to get you started on a journey of discovery. Remember that not only extended techniques but regular flute playing techniques have been discovered, developed and refined through experimentation. Experiment with your flute to see what you can discover about yourself and your instrument. Who knows, you might invent a new technique or find the solution to an age old problem☺

I am going to take a rest for a couple of issues, but in the words of a newly elected Governer.....

“I’ll be back!!”

** i.e. the distance from the embouchure hole to the first open key. This works well because contrary to popular myth the sound wave does not travel all the way down the flute and back again. There are two waves that resonate out from the middle of the flute.*

*** because of laws of acoustics and the fact that a flute scale is worked out on the basis of the blow-hole being mostly uncovered, this pitch change is not so cut and dried. The pitch difference will vary from a minor to a major 7th below the note fingered, changing gradually as you work respectively from C2 down to C1. However, these effects are executed over a fraction of a second so it doesn’t matter that much. (Composers might like to take note though☺)*