

## Teaching Flute at the beginner and intermediate levels

### ■ Beginner Level;

- The basics of playing
- The basics of music
- Foundational skills are put into place.

*In this period the pupil has to work and think very hard about what they are doing as habits are still forming. In around the 3rd year playing becomes easier and more natural and progress becomes faster, as the pupil enters the intermediate level.*

### ■ Intermediate Level;

- Foundational skills are honed and expanded in relation to the playing of music. I see the beginner level as lasting for around the first 3 years of playing.

*So I see the difference between beginner and intermediate more in how the pupil handles the flute rather than the level of difficulty in the music they are playing.*

Poor habits that are allowed to form at the beginner stage and carried over to intermediate will need a lot of work and might never be eradicated. They may instead need to be developed for that pupil's needs. An example of this would be a side blown embouchure, which for some, is a result of facial characteristics (i.e. best suited to side blown) but for many is a result of poor posture and flute position being left unattended at the beginner level.

### What about Advanced Level?

- The focus is solidly on musical goals
- The student is motivated by these goals
- Teaching is directed at achieving these goals

*Lesson content at the Advanced Level is in many ways pre-defined by the goal and not the teacher.*

At the advanced level motivation for mastery of the instrument comes for a large degree from the student's wish to achieve musical goals. The student will in most cases tell the teacher what they wish to achieve and the teacher will give help and guidance. The teacher takes on much more of a role as mentor while much of the responsibility for progress and direction has passed on to the student. For this reason we can disregard the Advanced level in this lecture.

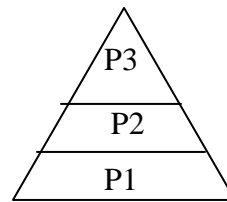
**But first a little philosophy.....Or.....How to get out of and avoid the rut.**

We all have our own musical, artistic, aesthetic and pedagogic philosophies. This is what forms us into individuals and as we develop, so do our philosophies (and of course vice versa). As a performing artist needs development to avoid stagnating, so does the teacher. If we get bogged down in the routine rut of doing things the same way, with all pupils, year after year we will cease to develop and grow and like all living organisms, once we stop growing we start decaying.

This doesn't mean that there is no place for applying experience, or that one should discard methods or techniques that are successful, simply that one should keep an open mind for new ideas and avoid getting complacent.

The Practical triangle

- The triangle represents the different levels of practical application in teaching



The practical triangle is an aid used when engaged in guidance counselling of pedagogic students, while they are gaining practical experience. It is designed to help them discover what knowledge and experience they are already in possession of and how this might be applied to the task in hand.

The levels explained;

- P3 Aesthetic/artistic reasons
- P2 Your reasons for this based on education and experience
- P1 What you are doing

This tool can be useful in any application to gain perspective over a new and challenging task or simply to take stock of what one is doing now.

Put simply; what, how, why?

For young students with little experience the first 2 levels are the most important, to avoid getting bogged down or overdue influence from the aesthetical side. Students as we know will often have very strong ideas and principals, but as we mature and gain experience we become (hopefully) more flexible. This is something to keep in mind but for a more experienced teacher/player, especially as we are working in an art form, the importance of the levels will be more equal.

A word or two on Aesthetics

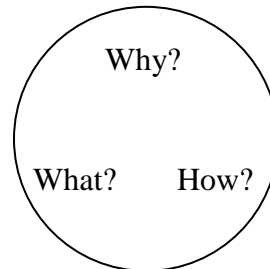
Aesthetic reasoning is more than pure artistic influence. It could be;

- The music school policy or goals
- "my teacher always did it like that"
- Cultural influence
- Etc.
- Aesthetic reasons are often based on personal baggage!

Aesthetics will always play a role in everything we do. If we try to be aware of their influence it can be easier to be objective about what we are doing. This doesn't mean that the importance of aesthetics should be discarded, just that their often hidden influence should be brought to the surface and examined. The last point regarding personal baggage is not necessarily negative, it should simply be kept in mind when examining why you want to do something a certain way.

### Circle of Philosophy

■The Circle of Philosophy represents a constant process of evaluation for the teacher.



■One's own methods and motives need to be examined in relation to the task

A circle is perhaps a better illustration of how the "levels" relate to each other with regard to the teaching of a musical instrument. One can start at any point, for any task and work backwards and forwards between the sections to gain a better perspective.

■The question "why" can just as easily be replaced with.....Why not?

*Are there elements in "what?" or "how?" that solve "why not?"?*

This sort of instance arises if one is going to attempt something unusual. Are there really reasons why it can't (or shouldn't) be done? Again one can start anywhere and work in any direction but it is likely that one will be working mostly between how? and why not? Of course "why?" can still be included in the circle. If there are problems then maybe changing the method will open the way. In this case we will have gone from what? to why not? to how?, back to why? and back to how? again and finally to what? The task, or tools might have changed slightly in the process of choosing a method.

*"Why?" and "why not?" are two sides of the same question!  
The solution to "why not?" may already be there in the circle.*

"Why?" and "why not?" can be used as simple questions or as the start of a list of reasons to justify something. This change of perspective will greatly influence their role in the process. "Why not" can be used both as justification for trying something or as a reason why it might be better not to.

**At last.....What? Teaching the flute at the beginner and intermediate levels!**

Why? Research shows that playing an instrument;

- Improves cognitive progress
- Improves co-ordination and fine motoric skills
- Improves visualisation skills
- Vastly improves academic skills
- Raises social awareness
- Improves self image
- Builds confidence
- Will make the child a natural leader and who knows, maybe President of the USA one fine day!!

There is a lot of of research done (much of it in the USA) into how playing an instrument and being involved in music programmes affects the child's development. Some of this research is of direct use to us as pedagogues as it maps out learning processes.

That said, one should keep in mind;

- They are political justifications for investment in music programmes and not reasons for teaching the flute
- Much of this research comes as a result of the limited resources used in music education. They need to show that they are "useful" to get funding
- While these points may be of interest politically, they have nothing to do with the philosophy of a musical instrument pedagogue

The research in a large part has been done to justify the "usefulness" of music programmes and education in a materialistic world where everything must be measured and quantified. Where everyone is fighting for funding music can no longer just be for music's sake, it must be balanced up and shown to be a magical and jolly useful thing. In the short term we need to play this game if we are to get necessary funding, but in the long term we need to work to have music accepted simply for music's sake. If we fail to do this then the importance of music and the Arts will be slowly, but surely eroded.

Why should we be teaching flute to kids?

- To train the next generation of musicians and thereby ensure the continuity of our Art and it's central place in society.
- To foster eager amateurs, who love and understand music. To ensure a new generation of concert goers and patrons of the Arts.

Of course we need to be training the musicians of the future but should this really be our main concern? There are already too many musicians being trained for too few jobs. We need to concentrate on the second group much more. By taking more care of the "average" pupils and inspiring them, rather than bullying them to work harder or quit, we will hopefully have a future filled with concert goers and voters who care about where the Arts figure in politics and the enrichment of society as a whole. If we only make programmes that favour future musicians then those pupils will graduate into a world of ever decreasing job possibilities (much like now).

If the second group is missing then the first simply becomes a cry in the materialistic wilderness.

*Never underestimate the power and importance of the general public in the future of the Arts*

Only with a large and eager public, across all classes can music get the necessary funding. The early experiences are what will have most influence on an individual's later relationship to music and as a music pedagogue it is YOU who will influence and secure the future of music.

Remember the Advanced Level?

- The focus is solidly on musical goals
  - The student is motivated by these goals
  - Teaching is directed at achieving these goals
- When MUSIC is the central element in lessons, then all of the above should also apply for the beginner and intermediate levels

Although work at the lower levels is mainly aimed at putting foundational and technical skills into place, an understanding of the musical goals can be the motivation needed to work properly with problem areas.

Lessons should be aimed at;

- Enjoyment and discovery of music
- Building general musicianship
- Good solid foundations of flute skills
- The achievement of obtainable goals
- Building confidence and independence in the pupil

The aim should be to develop intelligent, intuitive musical beings, not simply note reading flute blowing robots. At all levels the flute is the chosen tool but the subject is music. This means music in all its forms, not a snobby hierarchy where classical is at the top and the other forms are subordinate. I do feel however that classical technique should be central to the teaching as this gives a good and stable starting point for the investigation of other genre. We should set our own biases aside and guide the pupil through all types of music so that they can decide what it is that they like.

You should always keep in mind that...

- You can't fit a square peg into a round hole
- You might however, over time, sand and form that peg to fit!
- There's no point in bashing your head against a wall. Do like Joshua at Jericho....

*Use music and take the time it takes!!*

### **The little people- 5-8 years**

#### ■ Why?

- Open and ready
- Build an early relationship to the instrument and music
- Plenty of time, no rush
- Basic skills are put in place early

#### ■ Why not?

- Find it intimidating
- Embouchure problems
- Size of instrument
- Cost of instrument
- Unable to concentrate very long

Weigh the “why?” against the “why not?” and then the “why not?” against the “how?”. If there are real benefits to starting earlier than usual then adjusting the method might give a way ahead. You should however give good consideration as to whether any of the difficulties in the “why not?” list can really be overcome.

### **The little people- how?**

- Yamaha fife
- Group teaching
- Parental involvement
- Many activities- not just playing
- One thing at a time
- Patience
- Regular ”performances”
- FUN, FUN, FUN AND MORE FUN

### **9-11 years- The traditional beginner age**

Some general differences to the little people;

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| ■ A clearer idea of how a flute should sound | ■ Become demotivated if progress is too slow   |
| ■ Much more peer conscious                   | ■ Become demotivated if progress is too fast!! |
| ■ Impatient to improve                       |  |

Because this group has some idea of what playing a flute really is, are impatient to forge ahead but at the same time are sensitive to how they measure up to their peers a fine balance needs to be made in the speed of progress.

### **9-11 years- how?**

- |  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| ■ Yamaha fife as a primer                          | ■ New challenges                  |
| ■ Regular group lessons (unless it is problematic) | ■ Patience                        |
| ■ Parental involvement?                            | ■ Allow pupil input- talk to them |
| ■ Many activities- not just playing                | ■ Performances?                   |
|  | ■ FUN, FUN, FUN AND MORE FUN      |

Group lessons are useful as the lessons become very dynamic. However one must constantly evaluate the usefulness against problems like one pupil falling behind or another forging ahead.

Likewise the involvement of parents and performances can help in progress and confidence building. But some children in this age group (especially at the older end) prefer to be private about their playing and withdraw into the safety of the group. In such a situation the interest and enthusiasm of parents might be unwelcome and received in quite a hostile manner.

Performances can also be a problem with this sort of child, with them unwilling to play for the usual audience of family and peers. They will however, often be willing to play in a group setting for strangers rather than be the only who hasn't played on a concert.

### **Adolescence- The danger zone**

Why do many suddenly quit playing, for no apparent reason, as they reach their early teens?

#### Why?

- A need to exercise control over their own lives?
- Trying to make a point with their parents?
- Hormonal turmoil?
- Changing interests?
- A wish to blend in with the gang?
- Pressure of school work?

#### How?

- Give them some control over lesson content
- Cut the parents out of the loop
- Be friendly but keep some distance!
- Only natural that interests might change
- Help them to gain status amongst their peers
- Don't pressure them about practice

**If you can help them through this period they will probably  
carry on playing for many years**

### **Some generalisations**

<u>Girls</u>	versus	<u>Boys</u>
■ Other girls play flute		■ Conscious and individual choice
■ Easily influenced by peer pressure		■ Opinionated
■ Better concentration and fine motoric skills at an earlier age		■ Technically minded; fast progress driven by a need to understand
■ Easily discouraged if they feel they are behind in group		■ Show uncertainty through disruptive behaviour

The general reasons behind a boy or a girl choosing the flute might have some bearing on how you teach the individual. In general flute is seen as a typical girl's instrument and this means that a boy who chooses the flute has often thought long and hard about it.

Likewise the differences between the genders can also play a part in how you choose to teach a certain pupil. There can also be geographical differences connected to different schools. I will often adjust my teaching style depending on which school I am at and the general way that children from that school interact with me.

**Discipline!!**

- Important in group teaching if it's going to be fun
- You don't need to scream and shout
- Sometimes you don't need to say anything at all
- Self discipline in a group is the same as respect for the others
- Poor discipline can be a sign that you are on the wrong track

Discipline doesn't need to be overt control by the teacher, but it is an important factor if lessons are going to be productive and fun. Many of my pupils complain that their day at school is tiring and sometimes stressful simply because there is so much noise in the classroom. Some children react very badly to group disorder and things get very quickly boring and out of hand if minor discipline problems are not taken care of immediately. If the group is in turmoil then your shouting "QUIET" simply adds to the noise level. If you start talking in a normal voice then chances are that the kids will quieten down because they are afraid they are missing something. Sometimes saying nothing at all, simply standing and waiting can have the desired effect, or to tackle a disruptive influence simply moving closer to them or looking at them is enough.

One should work at making the group self-disciplining, with pupils showing respect not only to you as a teacher but to the rest of the group. Respect of course is a two way street and by you treating all pupils respectfully they will learn that this is the correct way to act.

**Lessons should contain:**

- |                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| ■ Playing by ear/ imitation    | ■ Using notation                           |
| ■ Improvisation/ creative work | ■ Performance training/confidence building |
| ■ Rhythm work                  | ■ FUN, FUN, FUN AND MORE FUN               |
| ■ Polyphonic playing           | ■ PRAISE, PRAISE AND MORE PRAISE           |
| ■ Theory in practice           |  |

Remember that the goal is to create musical beings. Working in a consolidation pattern will help the pupils to have "aha" experiences where they recognise what they already know. I feel this is also true of theory and notation. If the child already knows something before it is introduced in the written form then they are more likely to couple it with past experience and remember it. This is especially true at the beginner level where I feel that notation should never be used to technically advance the child.

**Teaching kids is rewarding but can at times be tiring. Remember:**

- Patience is a virtue
- Everything comes to those who wait

And finally.....

**If it ain't no fun then what's the point!?!**