

The left-handed flute as a tool for teaching and learning

by Petra Music

There has been a lot of interest in the potential of left-handed flutes since the first Boehm flute model was launched by a German manufacturer at the 2011 music fair in Frankfurt. Following initial trials, an active discussion developed regarding the uses, benefits and consequences for flute playing and teaching. During my early experimentation with the left-handed instrument, I was astonished at how difficult even simple melodies were to play. Although my knowledge and flute skills were there, it seemed impossible to apply them. As a result, I began to contemplate how my flute pedagogy students in Austria at the Mozarteum Salzburg/Innsbruck would react to this experience, and this consideration consequently led to my experimentation with the use of this instrument in my classes. I have come to realize there are some very great benefits to using the left-handed flute in pedagogical development.

A Short History of Left-Handed Flute Playing



The existence of left-handed flutes is not a novelty in the flute world. Throughout the history of our instrument there have been occasional musicians who have played the flute held toward the left side of the body. Before Theobald Boehm invented the modern flute in 1847 it was – with just a few adjustments – possible to play the flute towards either side. In the Renaissance period, flautists would choose their preferred side and in the Baroque period, even after the addition of the first keys, it was still not uncommon to play towards the left

side. Quantz, for instance, recommended a split-double key instrument for players who preferred to hold their flutes to the left. Michel Blavet, the first flautist to play at the Concerts Spirituels (1726) in Paris, was one of the most famous examples of a left-handed flute player, and in paintings and illustrations from that period, we can observe a number of flautists playing to the left while others hold their flute to the right. The painting by André Bouys from around 1710 shows three flautists of the royal court in France; one at the back, playing to the right, and two to his left with their instruments held in a manner suggesting they would both play left-handed.

A Journey Back in Time to your First Flute Lesson

The left-handed flute returns you, the professional flute player, to the experience of your first flute lesson. This alone can be a very valuable experience for any flute teacher. We think we know how to play, but now, everything is performed as if it were a mirror image. After the first few notes we realize that everything has to be adjusted. It is not just a question of moving the opposite finger. First, we have to check our posture. Of course, as experienced flute players we remain creatures of our flute habits. Our bodies become used to the asymmetrical position, to the extent that muscles on one side become more developed than those on the opposite side. Some of us don't even complain about the strain we experience because of this. We are just so used to using our bodies in a certain way that it happens with ease.

However, by swapping to the opposite side on the left-handed flute, everything changes. The less trained muscles on the opposite side will give in fairly soon, we will feel our bad posture choices immediately and effectively on this side. On the regular flute, for example, our students might fail to feel the relaxation of the muscles under the right shoulder when they turn the upper body to the left for the correct playing position; if they were to do it to the right side on the left handed flute, on the other hand, it is likely they will.

At the start, it is very helpful for the student to work with a partner. When first trying to play the left-handed flute, it can be easier to copy the finger movements of a second performer on a regular instrument (in this way, students also can practice a realistic teaching situation with their peers at the same time).

For flute students on their first steps towards becoming flute teachers, this will be an experience to remember. Too often, during a long day of teaching beginners, we may forget how



Working with a partner

lifelong training has affected our ability. We know how easy certain fingerings are, when done right, but sometimes we forget how hard it was before we got it right for the first time. Consequently, we move forward, carefully teaching the correct embouchure first, then adding articulation and slowly moving to cover the whole flute scale, showing how to balance the instrument, teaching the fingerings in our preferred method of order, correcting posture and hand position, making sure the breathing is relaxed. However, sometimes we might not be patient enough. Through the experience of holding the instrument to the left, it is possible for any flute player to remember and appreciate how difficult the fingering change from C2 to D2 really is. So many fingers need to move, the flute rolls in, the left hand grips the mechanism, and the left hand

little finger is up in the air, struggling to even find its key and possibly not even straight but strangely bent to the outside.

While struggling to play on the left-handed flute, even simple tasks seem difficult. Take, for example, the position of the left hand. The photographs below show a flute pedagogy student a few days after she played her final recital of Bach, Mozart and Poulenc. Here, she is trying to find balance on the left-handed flute. In the first and second picture she is trying to avoid touching the mechanism rods on the instrument. In flute pedagogy, the custom of telling seven-year-old flute students with their tiny hands not to touch the mechanism rods merely seems like a condescending joke after this experience and the doors to new teaching approaches subsequently have to be opened. In the third picture, the student is trying to gain better balance on the left-handed flute.

Below: a flute pedagogy student trying to adjust her hand positions on the left-handed flute.



Finding Balance and the Ideal Alignment of Head-Joint and Flute Body

Teaching students to find perfect balance on the flute has been frequently discussed. There are still many different opinions on this topic and I can only imagine that different traditions of flute and headjoint manufacturing have influenced this. In various flute publications, students are advised to balance the instrument between (at least) three points: the chin, the fulcrum of the left index finger and the right thumb. Some methods suggest also adding either one or both of the left thumb and right hand little finger to stabilize the instrument further – yet these are both fingers that play a vital role in most fingerings.

The alignment of headjoint and flute body also seems to be the world's best kept secret, at least when it comes to teaching children. Of course, flute professionals everywhere have found their personal ideal alignment, but too rarely are young students advised on this alignment or have their position adjusted later, when they grow taller or change instruments. Too often, flute teachers still consider the alignment markings provided by manufacturers indisputable. Unfortunately, most of these markings align the embouchure hole with its inside corner to the center of the keys, creating a problematic weight addition to the inside of the flute by the mechanism rods, thus making balance impossible. Well-trained flute-habits can no longer rescue a badly balanced instrument when it is played

Left-handed flutes

to the opposite side. Not even the most flexible embouchure can make up for difficult fingering combinations and the resulting movements of the flute on the chin. As a result, the left-hand flute student is forced to find their own ideal headjoint position. Once this experience has been made, the students can apply it to both their teaching approach and their own practice sessions.

A Possible Cure for Difficult Passages or a Bad Sound Day

Patricia George, in her article 'The Left-Handed-Flute' (*Flute Talk*, July/August 2012), recommended practising difficult passages on a rod held to the left. Sometimes, with the extra brain activity involved in this method, issues with tricky fingering passages can be resolved magically. Playing to the left side can also be refreshing for tired embouchure muscles; the slight difference in direction and angle of the air stream relaxes the muscles on the opposite side and subsequently there is a good chance of the sound opening up once one switches back to play the regular flute.

Practical Exercises for Flute Pedagogy Students on the Left-Handed Flute

1. Pick up the flute. Feel how the instrument balances in your hands. Find the ideal point on your right hand. Find the ideal point to balance the instrument on the fulcrum of your right index finger. Add the left thumb and the fingers of the right hand. Play G1 and explore the balance of your instrument between your chin, the right index finger and the left thumb.



2. Stand up and adjust your posture. Do you feel tension under the right shoulder? Does this change, if you put your right foot forwards and turn your upper body slightly to the right? How much is comfortable for you? Feel the balance of the flute in your hands. Try playing an F major Scale. What happens when you go from the second octave C to the second octave D?



3. Experiment with the alignment of the headjoint. Align the centre of the embouchure hole with the centre of the keys; check the sound and the balance in your hands. Then, move it slightly further towards the mechanism until the outside edge of the embouchure hole is in line with the center of the keys (Rockstro position). See, what difference this makes to the balance of the instrument and the sound, then find your own ideal position.

4. Examine your left hand. Is it touching the mechanism rods? How can you move the hand up to free the mechanism? Can you reach the trill keys? Adjust the footjoint position.

5. Try to play an A major scale. What happens to your right hand little finger and your right thumb? Is the thumb gripping the key? Try to release that tension.

6. Feel your left hand. Play chromatic runs from G1 to G2. How does it feel? Can you relax the fingers and reduce the height of the finger movement without touching the mechanism?

7. Find the perfect position for your left shoulder. How are the shoulder and the surrounding muscles affected when you move towards the front/back? What is the most comfortable position and how does it look in the mirror?

8. Try to improvise simple melodies on the flute and enjoy the work of unpractised muscle groups. Pay attention to the embouchure and explore different dynamic levels and different colors of sound. Are the movements of your lips similar/different to what you are used to?

9. Explore your way into playing the flute 'backwards'. Make sure to rest whenever you feel a strain on the body. Try to reduce the strain by adjusting the technique you are applying and analyze your posture/hand position.

10. Try playing well-known melodies and, if it seems easy enough for you, even difficult passages on this flute. Just have fun with it and let it teach you.



Is the Left-Handed Flute a Better Option for the Left-Handed Flutist?

Until recently, our education systems have forced many students into succumbing to a general right-handedness, creating a whole list of difficulties for those for whom such a requirement is distinctly unnatural. This process has been perceived as potentially traumatizing and life altering. Now that acceptance of left-handedness as a natural state is accepted, researchers have investigated further and a few publications have been produced which aim to address the difficulties left-handed musicians encounter. Now, with

the introduction of the left-handed flute, the flute world can also react to this topic and formulate a response.

While for many instrument groups such as percussion, accordion, string instruments or guitar (Jimi Hendrix was famous for playing his guitar to his right-hand side), there are clear advantages to handedness because each hand performs a different action, there are instrument groups appearing to be less affected by handedness (e.g. some brass instruments which can be played single-handedly).

Is there really a realistic need for a left-handed flute? Some recorder manufacturers make instruments for left-handed players, however these are intended for beginners. The reasoning behind this is that, especially with recorders, the more complicated actions are indeed performed by the left hand. The left thumb must repeatedly open, half open and close the thumb hole and, particularly in the higher registers, this is a difficult task. Thus, the setup on the recorder provides an advantage for left-handed players, suggesting that it would make more sense for right-handed players to make use of these left-handed beginner's recorders. When we translate this idea to the flute we can see a similar picture: the flute is held to the right side, but the left hand is significantly more involved in difficult fingerings, especially in the high register. Studies on handedness show that the dominant hand can repeat motor patterns approximately 10% faster than the weaker hand.

Training can raise the overall speed but both hands will never be able to operate at the same level. This result is particularly interesting, because in flute playing, not only does the left hand perform the more complicated fingerings, but it is also mainly responsible for maintaining the perfect balance of the flute on the fulcrum formed by the left index finger, a fact which would certainly suit the left-handed player.

Yet handedness is not the only physiological difference between humans. There are interesting studies, valuable for musicians, not only displaying an inter-dominance between ears and eyes, but especially a general dominance of one side of the body over the other. In asymmetrical sports, such as surfing or snowboarding, there is a greater interest in determining the correct equipment for all participants, and determining 'bodysidedness' is a crucial factor in learning these sports. On the snowboard, for example, you are a 'regular foot' if you present yourself left foot forward, a position somewhat related to playing the flute. Given these various inter-dominances, it may be that a left-handed person may not necessarily have a dominance of the left side of the body, so the preferred side of flute playing might not even be related to handedness.

The creator of the left-handed flute, Christina Xu, has stated how interesting it was to see the difference in the way people approached the instrument. For some it happens naturally, with an immediate ability to produce sound and play simple

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Back or shoulder pain?

Playing occasionally with a left hand flute can relief such discomfort. The body is turned in the opposite direction and muscles come in balance again!

More fun in teaching?

Teaching with a left hand flute means you face your student. Any mistake is seen and corrected immediately. And teaching is much more fun this way!

Are you left handed?

Finally, you can play your flute with the posture and in the way you feel most comfortable - no more compromises!

Left-handed flutes

tunes, while others struggle to balance the instrument and only begin to produce a few notes after some initial practice. She relates this to the flautist's personal preference of playing to a particular side.

"Can You Not Sometimes Just Play The Other Way?"

Many flutists out there have heard this sentence or something along those lines before, perhaps from their doctor, masseur, or physiotherapist. Medical specialists welcome the left-handed flute, not particularly for its value as an instrument for left handed flute players, but as a means for flautists to find some relief from the asymmetrical position. In other instrument groups it has become more and more common to explore this option; however, for flautists, it is inevitably going to be more difficult, because thoroughly practised finger movements have to be mirrored, and switching the hands over will be difficult. Only a few months after the launch of the left-handed flute, the young Swiss flute player Jan Grimm showed in his B.A. research project that it is certainly possible to interchange the two directions of playing after thorough preparation.

Having this new opportunity to explore the left-handed flute in both our flute practice and flute teaching is simply priceless, especially when it comes to training the new generation of flute

teachers, developing their patience and their understanding of our instrument's inner nature, with a view to promoting different and creative approaches in teaching.



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2nd Cumbria Flute Day Sunday 22nd February 2015 from 10 am Town Hall, Kendal LA 9 4DL

Fancy a Fantastically Fluting February Half Term Flute Day?

Flutes & Co with Wissam Boustany, Gareth McLearnon and Abbie Burrows are holding a Flute Day for flute players of all ages and abilities from beginners upwards.

The day will consist of lots of flute related activities: tone and extended techniques workshops with Gareth, inspirational performance masterclasses by Wissam, a dedicated "Junior Department" for younger flute players with Abbie. All this alongside flute choir playing, a fully stocked trade stand bursting with flutey goodies from Jonathan Myall, repairs and maintenance from Arthur Haswell, and culminating in a public concert.

Players £15

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Application forms and more details from:

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