

## LEARNING TO PLAY THE FLUTE IN THE IRISH TRADITION

### BASIC STEPS IN FLUTE PLAYING

#### **Producing a sound**

The first step is being able to produce a sound.

First of all pick up only the head joint of the flute - take it apart at the joint between the barrel and the upper middle joint, not at the slide (see Fig. 3.1 for nomenclature of flute parts). Place it to your lips in the following manner:

Press the inside edge of the hole (the embouchure) against the lower part of your lower lip, just where the red lip surface joins the normal skin below.

Ensure that the hole is placed centrally on your lips, i.e. directly below the tip of your nose.

[ Fig. 3.2. ]

Now stretch both your upper and lower lips across your teeth, so that a small gap is formed.

[ Fig. 3.3. ]

Blow a stream of air through this gap across the hole and into it.

This is a difficult action to describe - but a very useful comparison is the way you blow across the top of a bottle to produce a hooting noise, which most people have no doubt done at one time or another. ( This is in itself a very useful exercise for the complete beginner )

Blowing across the hole in this manner should produce a note. If it does not, then experiment with the angle of the air stream by rolling the head a little against your lips. This, and experimenting with the pressure of blowing will usually get results.

Make sure the head is parallel to your lips [ unlike Fig. 3.4. ]

It is possible to produce several notes using the head joint alone. If you block the open end of the barrel with the palm of your free hand, and repeat the instructions above, you should get a note which is lower in pitch.

Maintaining the same position and blowing harder while narrowing the gap between your lips will produce the octave of this low note.

A final variation is to play the standard note on the open ended head joint and at the same time push the first finger of the other hand into the open end.

You will find that a series of notes of different pitches can be sounded - after the manner of a 'Swanee Whistle' .

All these sounds produced using the head joint alone can be heard on Track 1 of the accompanying recording.

You will probably have noticed by now that the pitch of the note can be changed by varying the position of the flute against the lips. Try the following exercise:

Put the head to your lips and blow a note. Rotate the head on its axis while continuing to blow, and note the following:

Turning the head in towards the player flattens the pitch of the note, and conversely turning it outwards sharpens it. [ Fig.3.5. ]

Also note that with the head steady against the lips, increasing the blowing pressure sharpens the note, and blowing more softly flattens it.

These effects are also included on Track 1.

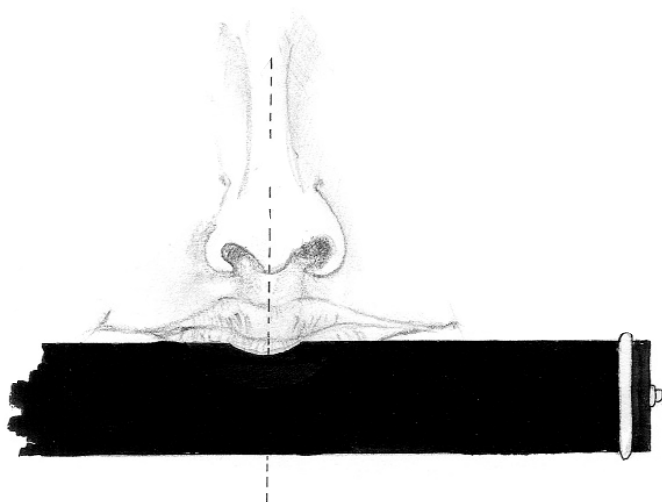


Fig. 3.2



Fig. 3.3

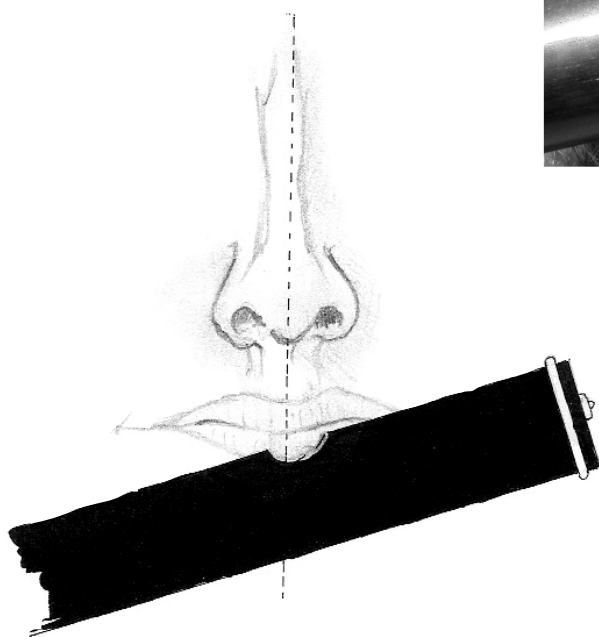


Fig. 3.4

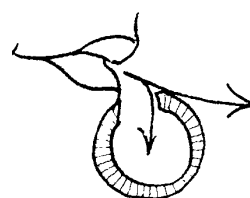


Fig. 3.5

**Problems with the head joint exercises**

Inability to produce the sounds as described above can be due to several factors:

Some people find it very easy to make a sound with the head joint, and others find it impossibly difficult. In this respect the flute, in common with other types of woodwind instruments, differs from other types of instrument where basic sound production is not such a problem.

The reason for this initial ease or difficulty must somehow be related to the shape of the player's mouth and lips, but such a connection has never been demonstrated. The vast majority of people are capable of learning to blow a flute regardless of the initial problems. In many cases the failure to produce a sound is related to one or more of the following:

1/ The flute is in the wrong position against the lips.

An easy and most effective way to check this is to play in front of a mirror, when it is easy to see the relative positions of flute and lips. Sometimes it is hard to see where the embouchure hole is when looking in the mirror, and in this case if you place a piece of tape around the flute equidistantly on either side of the embouchure, then its position can be seen when looking in the mirror.

2/ The lips are not held in the correct position.

The position that the lips are held in while playing is called the embouchure (which also of course refers to the hole in the head joint). Full development of a good embouchure takes time, and the only thing to do at this stage is to copy as exactly as possible the way in which more advanced players do it. [Fig. 3.3] Commonly the lips are pouted too much. They should be drawn back firmly across the teeth.

3/ The angle of the airstream is wrong.

This can be the result of the flute being held with the embouchure hole tilted too far forward or back, or it can be due to blowing the air out in the wrong direction.

The first is easily corrected by adjusting the position of the head joint on the lips. The correct position is very limited and it can be hard to hold the right position after you have found it. This is partly solved by holding the flute correctly, but since we are only using the head at the moment, simply try to be aware of the problem, and hold the head as steadily as possible. A correctly formed embouchure is a great help here as the head will tend to wobble about on lips which are not stretched.

If the player is blowing the airstream in the wrong direction then the way to correct it is to realise that the direction of the airstream is controlled by the relative positions of the upper and lower jaws. If the upper jaw is protruding over the lower, then the airstream will be directed downwards, and the reverse is also true.

Try this:

Form your lips into the shape they would be in when playing and place your hand open flat with palm facing you, about eight inches in front of your mouth.

Now blow as you would for the flute, and you should be able to feel the airstream hit your hand.

Next, move your lower jaw in and out, very slightly, and note how this has the effect of

shifting the place where the stream hits your hand.

If you're blowing in the right way to sound a flute, then the airstream should hit your hand considerably below the horizontal.

The beginner will probably find that their ability to produce a note varies quite a lot, and they will be able to do it one day and not the next. This is a common experience with all beginners, and even advanced players find that their ability to produce a consistently good tone varies.

Such variations will persist for some time, but eventually they will stabilise.

Having already dealt in detail with the basic sound production, it's time to explain some of the theory behind it.

Fig. 3.6. shows the mouth piece of a tin whistle in cross section.

When the player blows into the tin whistle, the air passes down the windway and meets the sharp edge of the lower part which is known as the labium.

This splits the airstream, with some of the air going down the tube of the whistle, and some of it being directed outside. Both of these airstreams can be felt on the hand. This splitting of the airstream causes turbulence at the fipple, and it is this turbulence which sets the air column in the whistle in vibration, thus making a note.

The sound of the flute is produced in the same way, with the important difference that the flute has no windway to direct the airstream onto the edge, which in the case of the flute is the edge of the embouchure hole on the head joint.

The airstream is split by the edge of the embouchure and the turbulence produced similarly sets the air column in the flute in vibration.

In the case of the flute the player's lips replace the windway, and many of the beginners' problems can be traced to their difficulty in forming a properly shaped windway - in other words a good embouchure.

While the beginner should be producing useful sounds in a few weeks, nevertheless you should realise that the process of development goes on for years. The fact that there are so many factors affecting the sound production in the flute may seem to the beginner to be a great drawback, as they are initially so difficult to control, but it is the very fact that these factors can be changed that give the flute its most essential character.

### **Holding the flute**

Presuming that you can now make a series of sounds with the head joint, you are now ready to use the whole instrument, and it is of the utmost importance for your future development that you learn to hold the flute properly right from the start, as bad habits acquired now can cause havoc later on.

Assemble the flute, and make sure the six open finger holes are in line.

The pieces should be put together with a twisting motion, as this is kinder to the cork or thread lapping on the joints.

In general the embouchure is not placed directly in line with the finger holes, but rather turned slightly towards the player [ Fig. 3.7 ].

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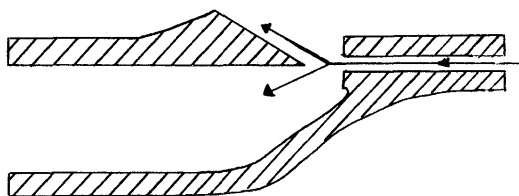


Fig. 3.6 Whistle mouthpiece in section showing splitting of airstream



*Player this side*

Fig. 3.7 Alignment of Finger holes and Embouchure



Fig. 3.8 The main point of support

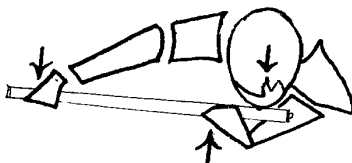


Fig. 3.9 How the flute is balanced