

How to Play the Spirit Flute

Placing the flute against the mouth

The natural tendency is to place the mouth end of the flute *into* our mouth and blow. Unfortunately, this creates excess moisture in the flute and limits the type of techniques one can use. Instead, close the lips then place the flute *against* them. Allow the upper lip to close a portion of the air hole (half or more) and place the lower lip just slightly underneath the flute (See Figure-1). In this way a smaller air hole is created and the air passage from the mouth is reduced as well. This will allow for better tonguing and affects control greatly. Another way to describe this is to slightly pucker your lips like you are kissing the flute. It creates a smaller air passage. Playing the flute is more about air pressure than air volume.



Figure1- Flute Position on Mouth

Fingering

The most difficult task with this flute is to close all of the holes completely. If you can do that, you can learn to play this instrument relatively quickly. On the 5-hole flute, close all of the holes making sure that the third finger from the top stays on the flute between the 2nd and the 3rd hole, counting from the top of the flute (See Figure-2). Do not move the finger from that position; it supports the flute when all the holes are open (See Figure-3). Otherwise, the flute will fall out of your hands. With the 6-hole flute use the pinkie fingers to support the flute. Avoid using the sides of the fingers for flute support.

With all the holes closed, blow into the flute easily. If the sound is too whimsical, blow a little harder. The sound you are listening for is a nice deep even tone, pleasant to the ear. If you get anything else, it is because one of the holes is still slightly open or you are blowing too hard. Even a slight crack left by one of your fingers will result in an unpleasant note or buzz. A rule of thumb is that if the unpleasant note sounds too high, it is normally one of the upper two fingers that is slightly open. So adjust your fingers and try again until you achieve that deep bottom note with all the holes closed. The key point here is to *adjust your fingers*, not add more pressure (also called white knuckling). Too much pressure will only cramp your fingers. Do not go on to play the other notes until you achieve the bottom note because once you get that one, all the others are a breeze.



Figure 2-All holes closed



Figure 3-All holes open

For those who have never played a wind instrument, I recommend that you stand in front of a mirror and play the scale by lifting one finger at a time as you move up the flute and then back down. Do this *slowly*! After doing this a couple of times in the mirror, sit down and play with eyes closed for a time. This will develop your fingering in a shorter period of time because it forces you to use your tactile skills. At the same time, you are training yourself to play without having to look down on the flute all the time (much more rewarding when out in nature). Another advantage is that with your eyes closed, you will be more likely to allow feelings to be expressed through your breath and you will develop a better ear.

Important Tips

Holes - must be completely closed or you will get a squeaky sound; you will know it when you hear it and you won't like it.

Play slowly - take your time with each note; this way you will develop good habits. Finger speed will come by itself.

Close your eyes - this develops your tactile skills and coordination more quickly.

Breathe - at normal intervals; do not wait until you have to gasp for air. Your breath capacity will develop automatically.

Experiment - blow softly on each note and then increase the breath to experience the full range of each note. If the note becomes shrill or breathy, decrease the airflow. The most difficult note to play is the bottom note (all holes covered). It is more delicate than all the others and if you blow too hard it will go to the next octave and sound high-pitched and shrill.

Play the scales - from the bottom up and then go back down. As you lift each finger from the bottom, increase the airflow slightly with each fingering hole that you open. Another way of describing it is to increase the energy of your breath as you go up the flute. If a note sounds sort of sad (flat), increase your breath a little and it will sound more lively (sharper).

Creating Music

Most tribal cultures, never had a written music language. They did not find it necessary. In turn they developed instruments that were rhythmic and easy to play. The flute was one of the more complex instruments to be developed. It is set up in such a way that the notes are in harmony with each other (harmonic). In western music it is called the pentatonic scale. Penta, meaning five, represents the five major notes (holes) on the flute (For those of you who have a 6-hole flute, please see the section on the Diatonic scale flute). Because of the harmonic scale, this flute is very easy to play. Almost all notes compliment each other, so you cannot go too far wrong as you start to experiment. By now you have been playing the scales up and down and, more than likely, are getting bored with doing this. That's great. It means you've got it. Now play the same scales but this time vary the notes by playing some longer, some shorter, repeating some of them, going back and forth between two or three notes, and so on. Before you know it, you will have a song. Songs can be created with very few notes, keep it simple. It is the feeling that you put into it that gives the melody character. Much like singing a song, put feeling into the melodies that you are creating. Remember, if it sounds good to you, that is all that matters. It is for your own pleasure and entertainment. No pressure, just fun!

In the beginning the flute seems to be all about fingering. Those techniques will come to you fairly quickly. Once you feel comfortable with your fingering, the flute becomes all about breath. *It is like singing with your breath.* When we sing we try to be melodic by using inflections in the voice. Otherwise it would sound very monotone. The same holds true when you are *singing* with your breath into the flute. If you just blow a continuous stream of air, it is somewhat monotonous. But when we add a little *inflection* into the breath, it gives an entirely new quality to the notes. It is like whistling without making the sound. Try creating a short melody with your breath without the flute in your mouth. Now do the same thing into the flute and use just a couple of notes.

When you are trying new things on the flute, use the top two or three notes only. The two bottom notes are harder to play. Use your new techniques on the bottom notes once you feel good about how they sound on the top three notes.

When creating your music on the flute it is important to be free of the structured ideas that we have learned through western music. ***There are no right or wrong ways to create music.*** If it is pleasing to you, that is all that matters. Our flutes are digitally tuned and come with a fingering chart that tells you what notes you are playing. This is intended for those who know how to read music. It is *not* necessary to read music to create songs on this flute. Be creative and have *fun*. And remember, play and practice when you feel like it. Do *not* treat your flute playing like a chore that must be done.

5 Hole and 6 Hole Flutes

The flutes created and used by the early tribal cultures are based on the pentatonic scale ("penta" meaning five). These five basic notes are harmonically related to each other. That is why the 5-hole flutes are so easy to play and require no musical background.

The more complex and contemporary scales can be played on the 5-hole flutes, but the 6-hole flutes allow one to access these scales more easily. So for those that wish to play more structured music and contemporary scales or they do have a music background and want to play the diatonic and chromatic scales, the 6-hole flute is a great next step.

What is important to remember is that the 5-hole flute is a wonderfully fun and versatile instrument that will give you hours of joy and satisfaction.

The 6-hole flute is ideal for those that wish to experiment further with other scales or have a music background such as musicians and composers. (See instructions for the 6-hole flute.)

Techniques

Breath - can be changed and manipulated in a number of ways. Any way that you can change the airflow from your mouth will change the sound on the flute. Moving the tongue rapidly in front of the mouthpiece while blowing will make it sound like you are fingering very fast. Altering the airflow in any way with the tongue or mouth will give a special effect on the flute such as trilling the tongue or snapping the tongue (similar to saying the word "tuck"). We all have different abilities on how to do this, so be creative.

Tonguing - is produced by using the tongue and creating an effect that is similar to emphasizing the letter "T". This creates a staccato effect and brings clarity to the note- "tuck-tuck-tuck-tuck". Tonguing will introduce rhythm and timing to the song. It can be very fast and deliberate, or slow and subtle, as well as all ranges in between.

Fingering - affects the sound of the flute as well. Sliding the finger off the hole slowly will draw the note out and give it a moody or blues quality. This called "bending the note". Lifting the finger off the hole slowly will change the note. Covering the hole only halfway also produces a different note. Experiment and develop your own unique style and techniques.

Rhythm - on the flute is very similar to generating rhythm when we whistle or mimic a melody by "do-do-doing" with the tongue. The key is to use the tongue to create rhythm. Try repeating the letter "T" with your tongue and then slowly be more and more subtle with it.

Embouchure - The natural tendency is to place the mouth end of the flute *into* our mouth and blow. Unfortunately this creates excess moisture in the flute and limits the type of techniques one can use. Instead, close the lips then place the flute *against* them. Allow the upper lip to close a portion of the air hole (half or more) and place the lower lip just slightly underneath the flute. In this way a smaller air hole is created and the air

passage from the mouth is reduced as well. This will allow for better tonguing and affects control greatly. Another way to describe this is to slightly pucker your lips like you are kissing the flute. It creates a smaller air passage. Playing the flute is more about air pressure than air volume.

Experimenting with the breath and fingering becomes very rewarding. If you feel like you are getting bored with your playing, it is a positive sign that you have mastered your present techniques and that it is time to start getting creative and *experiment*. This is the way to develop your individual style of play. I have had the pleasure of playing the flute with many people and am always amazed that no two flute players sound the same. Everyone has his or her own individual style of play.

Moisture Build-up in the Flute

Moisture build-up occurs in all wind instruments. When blowing into the flute, condensation from the breath will build up in the air chamber and, after a time, will clog the air passage so that the air will not be able to flow easily. Until the tongue and mouth become used to the mouthpiece, the moisture build-up can be frequent. The build-up normally occurs after playing for a while. When this occurs, place a finger partially over the sound hole and blow hard into the flute (See Figure-4). If there is too much moisture, a drop or spray of water will come out from the front of the sound hole. Then hold the flute by the bottom end (opposite of mouthpiece) and shake it out. Creating an embouchure when playing the flute (as described earlier) will also help in reducing the moisture build-up.



Clearing Moisture Build-up
(Figure-4)