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## Busting Some Flute Myths

By [Bradley Garner](#)

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“Many, perhaps most, young players play with the headjoint positioned too high on their lip, causing the air to go across the hole too much. This raises the pitch. The correction lies not in pulling the headjoint out further, but in bringing it down and rolling it in.”

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I may offend some flute friends with this article, but a bit of controversy is a good thing because it gets us to think and discuss things. Conventional wisdom is not always correct. Keep an open mind and you might discover a few things that will make you a better player and teacher. I teach what I think is the most natural and efficient way to play the flute.

**Myth #1: The thumb Bb key is inferior to other Bb fingerings.**

In fact, there is no discernible sound difference among the three Bb fingerings. Each has its place. In general, use the thumb Bb in flat keys. Don't slide with the thumb from Bb to Bn. When necessary, use the right-hand lever to avoid a slide with the left thumb or an awkward note connection with the one-and-one fingering (left-hand first finger and right-hand first finger) – such as the note combinations G-Bb or Ab-Bb-Cb.

**Myth #2: Pull the headjoint out as much as necessary to bring the flute into tune.**

Pulling the headjoint out too much often makes matters worse instead of better. The flute is manufactured to produce the best pitch with the headjoint pulled out an 1/8" to 1/4". Pulling it out excessively distorts the scale. Many, perhaps most, young players play with the headjoint positioned too high on their lip, causing the air to go across the hole too much. This consequently raises the pitch level. The correction lies not in pulling the headjoint out further, but in bringing it down and perhaps rolling it in. For a standard flute sound with a nice core you should direct the air with what I call the 60/40 rule – 60% into the flute and 40% across the strike edge of the embouchure hole. This varies depending on volume and tone colors desired.

**Myth #3A: Flute vibrato cannot be taught.**

Some flutists believe vibrato is a natural outgrowth of musical maturity and will occur naturally. Vibrato does indeed sometimes occur naturally, and it is almost always wrong when it does. Some students can produce a natural vibrato just by emulating fine players they hear, but these natural-occurring vibratos are often what could be described as nanny-goat vibratos. They do emanate from the throat but with a total lack of control. I frequently find myself with an uncontrollable urge to eat a tin can when I hear it.

**Myth #3B: A proper vibrato is a diaphragm vibrato, and throat vibrato should be avoided at all costs.**

First, diaphragm vibrato is a misnomer; the diaphragm is an involuntary muscle. It is possible to produce vibrato with the abdominal muscles, but it has the disadvantages of being a lot of work, difficult to produce as fast as is often needed, and difficult to control the width of the vibrato. A controlled throat vibrato, on the other hand, produces the best results. Most of the great flute players use their throat (glottal muscle) to create a spinning vibrato.

Try playing a loud note with a spinning vibrato in the upper register while putting your hand on the top part of your throat to see if it moves. You can feel some sympathetic movement in the abdomen. I think that this is where the confusion may lie. After all, if we have a balloon full of air and we pulse at the

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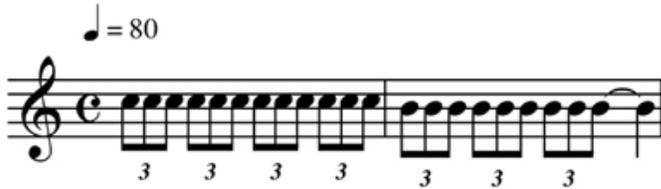
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top of the balloon, there will be some pressure change in the balloon.

Try pulsing triplets using a throat staccato with the syllable ah. Now try it with the flute on four triplet groups on C and then on B with three triplets tied to a quarter note at about mm=80.



As you go down chromatically, gradually increase the speed to about mm=96 and let the triplets run together without the throat staccato. Once you can control the glottal muscle in this manner, you need to use vibrato on a musical phrase. I use "Going Home" – the English horn solo from Dvorak's *New World Symphony*.



**Myth #4: Flute fingerings are sacred and no alteration is acceptable.**

The flute is a hunk of metal with holes in it. Whatever fingering combination produces the best pitch and tone quality in a given situation is the fingering of choice. There are several third-octave fingerings that have perfectly acceptable alternates, so rest easy. An alteration here and there for better intonation, more efficient fingering, or better response will not endanger your eternal salvation.

**Myth #5: Never move the jaw.**

The most efficient way to decrease the size of the aperture is to bring the lower lip up or out, which necessitates a slight jaw movement. Galway backs me on this one. Yes, he moves his jaw!

**Myth #6: In tonguing, the tongue should come between the teeth (as the French do it).**

For an occasional soft attack, this can work well, but it should not be done as a standard practice. The belief that French flutists tongue this way exclusively is erroneous. I discussed this with the famous flutist and good friend Jean-Pierre Rampal. I asked him if he always tongued between the lips and he said, “no, not always.” There is no way that he could have been the “King of detache,” as he is known, if he did this exclusively. Listen to his recording, *The Flute of Sans-Souci* or his recording of the Telemann *Fantasies*, to hear examples of his fantastic articulation.

**Myth #7: Learning to take a proper breath requires years of study, effort, and meditation.**

The truth is, breathing is a perfectly natural function. The average person does it about 17,280 times a day. I suspect that flutists breathe a bit more than that. Simply take a full, deep breath using the muscles about three inches below your navel and use that air in the most efficient manner (in the case of the flute, with a small, focused aperture).

When people talk, they are generally unaware that they take breaths. It should be the same while playing the flute. There should be no huge breaths that cause oral gymnastics or loud sounds. This simply is not normal during our everyday lives. I don't want anyone to know that I am taking a breath. When you take a breath, try to keep the lips a bit more similar to the aperture when playing. This will also enable your embouchure to be ready faster for the next attack. You will start without cracking the note and also have a better, more focused sound at the beginning of the phrase.

**Myth #8: Flutists must learn to live with a sharp 3rd-space C#.**

On most modern flutes, C# is much less of a problem than it is on older flutes without the improved scale. In any event, C# is easily played in tune when the player is properly set up with the 60-40 rule mentioned in Myth #2.

**Myth #9: The low register is necessarily weak and there is nothing to be done about it.**

Not true. Listen to the pros. Many modern headjoints are cut to permit a much stronger low register. Players must pull the lip corners down, drop the jaw back,

and blow more into the flute. (Low-register practice is also not a bad idea.) I ask students to see how loudly they can play Taffanel and Gaubert #1. Go ahead and let it sound gross and crack a bit. How do you know how loud you can play until you go too far?

*The following questions are often asked by students.*

**Mystery #1: How can I make a finely tapered release without the pitch going flat or dropping an octave?**

Pull the lower lip and flute to the side slightly; this makes the aperture smaller, which in turn increases the air speed, thus helping to maintain the pitch. I pull to the right but many of my students pull to the left.

**Mystery #2: How can I develop a more facile technique?**

There's no real secret here. Daily scales and arpeggio practice throughout the range of the instrument is indispensable. The most important arpeggios are the majors, minors, dominant sevenths, and diminished sevenths.

**Mystery #3: How can I develop a fast double- and triple-tongue?**

First, the choice of syllable is crucial. The most is efficient is Ti-Ki, Ti-Ki (short "i"), which positions the fore-tongue and the back-tongue closer together; thus it is faster and shorter. Making this syllable change from Too-Koo, Too-Koo can increase your tongue speed immediately by 30%. For triple tonguing, the most efficient method is a displaced double-tongue, as in Ti-Ki-Ti, Ki-Ti-Ki, which only has three Ts. (Ti-Ti-Ki Ti-Ti-Ki has four Ts and is therefore less efficient). Check out my 11-year-old student, Yibiao Wang on YouTube playing Donjon's *Le Tambour*. ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYusjztSQIU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYusjztSQIU)) He practices my father's tonguing exercise every day for about 45 minutes. The tongue has 16 different muscles. Give them a good workout every day.

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## Bradley Garner



Bradley Garner teaches at The University of Cincinnati College–Conservatory of Music, Queens College, New York University, and the Juilliard School. He has performed with the New York Philharmonic, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, and has been principal flutist with many orchestras including the Atlantic Sinfonietta, the New York Virtuosi, the Bronx Arts Ensemble, and the 20th-Century Chamber Orchestra. He has a doctorate from the Juilliard School, studying with Julius Baker, and a bachelor and master degrees from West Texas State University where he studied with his father, Gary Garner.

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