

## Experiences of a flute teacher

### Tip-of-the-Tongue Tales

If every flautist would pronounce the 'Tip of the Tongue Tales' with a clear 't', articulation on the flute would be a piece of cake.

The French pronounce their language with the tongue in front of the mouth, close to their teeth. This gives wonderful articulation when transposed to a flute. English and American 't's' tend to be pronounced with a weaker tongue that is positioned in the centre of the mouth, whereas the 'th' is pronounced with the tongue between the teeth. Which shows that a 't' can be made in many different ways. What should we do when playing the flute?

For the beginning flautist the only question is: do I use my tongue (to separate notes) or not (when playing a slur)? As a teacher you should not make the tongue a problem. Tell your pupil to 'let the train come by' (tu, tu, tututu) and see to it that the movement of the fingers runs parallel to that of the tongue. Few beginners will be aware of what they actually do with their tongue, and they don't need to be.

But after some years you want your students to experience that they can make music sound better and that playing with different articulations can be part of giving a piece its character. A strong or high note should have a stronger attack so that it has its full sound immediately. For this attack you use a sharp 't'- attack. A soft or low note might have a softer character and so a weaker attack could be made by playing a 'd'- attack. And this is where problems can occur.

Some students solve the problem by first saying a very loud 't'. This gives an explosion of the tone and after that they start thinking about blowing air into the flute. Or they just push up the air with their throat which gives no attack at all or one that is too weak.

At this stage it is time to make the students aware of what the tongue does in the mouth while playing. The German flautist Hanns Wurz is the first and only author that has written about this in his *Querflötenkunde*<sup>1</sup>. He states that your tongue should be positioned as when you pronounce the 'j' in 'jeans'. When you do this the sides of your tongue touch the upper back teeth. Many (professional) flautists always play with the tongue like that.

Imagine the airstream coming from your diaphragm through your throat at a certain speed. When the tongue is hanging somewhere in your mouth the air will spread out in the mouth and you lose some of the airspeed. To compensate this loss of speed you will narrow your lips and the tone sounds weak. By keeping the sides of your tongue against the upper back teeth you create a gutter for the airstream straight up to the embouchure. The airspeed is kept high and your lips do not have to compensate. The result is a powerful tone, with focus and a nice tone-colour.

A positive side effect is that the bottom of the tongue has no strained muscles. The throat can be wide open and relaxed and the lower jaw can move freely because the throat and jaw have nothing to do with the tongue.

Now let us look at what our tongue does when we start playing a tone. It might appear that a 't' or 'd' is produced by first bringing the tongue against the teeth and then pulling it back. Tonguing like that gives an extra flutter with every attack.

Tonguing should be done by just 'letting go'. Position the tip of your tongue against the spot where you feel the roots of your front teeth. (or against the top part of the teeth if it feels better). Then you make sure that there is enough air waiting in your mouth to flow out. Let go of your tongue – 'open the gate' – and let the air go out. Practice this way of attacking slowly and it will improve your attack and become a natural part of a beautiful tone.

Now become aware of the 't' that you make and try to make it a French tip-of-the-tongue 't' , wherever you come from.

Try this Alex Murray-exercise to make a fine attack with abdominal support:

Teacher and student take turns playing a tone of 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star' (g-g-d-d-e-e-d, etc.). Breathing before each tone is allowed. Finish the whole song and with every tone the student should try to copy the teacher's.

1. The teacher plays each tone with an 'h' - attack (no tongue but use your diaphragm), the student copies.
2. Make each tone with an 'h-d' - attack: After starting the tone from the diaphragm with the 'h', let the tongue slightly touch the roots of the front teeth. Keep on blowing the air as if it were one tone, do not make two separate tones. Also the tone should not develop a diminuendo between the 'h' and the 'd'.

3. Now speed up between the 'h' and the 'd'. Beware: the emphasis is still on the 'h' (as in hither).

4. Finally the 'd' follows the 'h' so rapidly that you hear only a 'd'- attack, but it is backed up by a fine abdominal support.

<sup>1</sup>Hanns Wurz – Querflötenkunde. Piepenstock Verlag Baden-Baden, 1988.

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