

From the teaching practice

Flageolets, a very special technique

Part I

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Teaching is like working in a candy store. There is something to suit every customer or student. If someone is looking for sweets then there is a lot to choose from. If he would rather have something savory then we can provide that too. We do the same when we are teaching. There are many ways of explaining things and we choose the approach that suits the individual student best. A good teacher has a candy shop full of examples and exercises and searches for the one that works for a particular student, however long it takes to find it. It is one of the nice things about teaching, the creativity that is always called upon. If needed you search for a tenth way of explaining something to a student until he understands. No two students are alike, in age, in skills, in experience. And it can be very satisfactory for a teacher too when he has found a new way of explaining something that he has explained many times before.

Recently, with one of my (adult) students, I came to speak about flageolets or harmonics. She wanted to learn to play The Alphorn, number 10 from Hilary Taggart's book *In the Sun*.¹

The student had learned to overblow octaves well-tuned and had also discovered the next harmonics above the octave. This is good for a flexible embouchure and other techniques in breathing and tone production. However, playing a specific harmonic that is clear and in tune at once asks for special skills.

For this student it was difficult to find the harmonics at once. They were too loud, not clear and they didn't tune.

So I opened my candy store. First I inspected the **flute**. Is the position of the cork correct? The mark at the end of the cleaning rod should be visible in the middle of the mouth hole. If needed the cork can be turned somewhat in or out to achieve better tuning in the octaves (take care that the flute is not turned in or out while playing).

Do not use brutal **force** in breathing. You will not produce any harmonic or a very poor one. Instead, blow the airstream with permanent breath support. When the speed of the airstream is too slow, the harmonic will definitely be flat.

The Alphon

Larghetto e molto tranquillo

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 4/4 time signature. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff begins with a *mp* dynamic and includes *mf* and *p* (echo) markings. The second staff starts at measure 5 and includes *p* (echo), *mf*, and *p* (echo) markings. The third staff starts at measure 10 and includes *p* (echo), *mf*, *p* (echo), *mf*, *f*, *p* (echo), and *mf* markings. The tempo/mood is indicated as **Larghetto e molto tranquillo** and **Poco animando**. The score includes various articulations such as slurs, accents, and breath marks (circles with a vertical line).

NB In this edition both the lower note for the fingering and the higher note of the desired pitch of the flageolet are written as black notes. Sometimes the lower note has a different shape or there is no lower note at all and the performer decides which root is used. The two notes are not intended to sound together.

The **direction** of the airstream should be rather high (not too deep into the flute). Imagining that you are ‘blowing the air across your lower lip’ works very well. The student should feel the airstream pass across both lips and concentrate on the lower lip. Some methods suggest ‘grasping’ an (air-)straw. With beginners it can help to use a real drinking straw between the lips to let them feel the correct air column.

Although not all flutists agree on this, my method (adopted from Marcel Moyse) of changing the direction of the airstream is by smoothly moving the lower jaw back and forth while keeping the position of the upper jaw more or less the same. (Other methods suggest moving only the lips, not the jaws. I would not know how to get it done.) Exercising the movements of the jaw should start from the very first lesson. Blow the air against your hair or your chin, blow against the flame of a candle without blowing it out, use a Pneumo Pro, blow against your hand from the wrist to the fingertips, etc. The candy store is open for this also.

Start with a *p*-attack (*puh*), to be sure that the opening between the lips is not too large. Check in a mirror whether a very small opening in the middle of the lips is visible. Then blow away both lips as if you are blowing away a piece of cigarette paper or as if you feel two pinpricks on your lips. When the lip opening is too wide you cannot feel these refinements. Another suggestion: Imagine a cone between your lips, the wide part is inside your mouth, the top end between the lips (when playing *forte*, the cone is in opposite position with the wide part on the outside).

In summary: use breath support, do not blow with too much force, make a small lip opening, blow the air in a high direction and use your ears. The target is to pluck a relaxed tone from the air.

Good luck and have fun!

¹Hilary Taggart – In the Sun. Fourteen pieces for solo flute. Hunt Edition HE79.

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