

## HOW TO BUY A FLUTE

by Mark Thomas



One of the most popular instruments in the world, the flute is played by people of all ages and skill levels. Flute repertoire is extensive: the instrument is used in school band programs, symphony orchestras, flute choirs, jazz ensembles, and as a solo instrument. Popular, classical, jazz, and even rock music has been either written or transcribed for the instrument.

Many people are unaware that the concert, or C flute is the best-known member of a family of related instruments played in the same manner. The flute family consists of the piccolo, E flat, concert, alto, and bass flutes. The concert flute is the instrument of choice for beginners.

Beginner school bands usually introduce the flute in the fourth or fifth grade. It is important for young players to be large enough to reach the keys without straining the neck or hands. For an eager student whose reach is not sufficient, flutes with curved headjoints are available; many flute manufacturers offer a beginner model instrument featuring both a standard and a curved-style headjoint. The curved headjoint makes it possible for a young flutist to hold the instrument without having to reach beyond his or her capabilities at first. As the student grows, it is a simple matter to change over to the traditional, straight headjoint. Be sure to check with your local music dealer, band director, or flute teacher when deciding whether to purchase the extra headjoint option; the initial cost is nominal. Purchasing a regular flute and discovering later that the student really needs the curved head necessitates the purchase of the curved headjoint and another case as well.

### FLUTE HISTORY

An ancient Chinese flute, the "tsche," played in about 2637 BC, is believed to be the earliest transverse flute (an instrument held horizontally). Made of bamboo, both sides were closed, with a mouth-hole in the middle. Flutes have been made of glass, wood, ceramic, brass, and even human and animal bones. Gradually, improvements over the crude designs were made, keys were added, and attempts were made to improve the pitch and sound of the instrument. It is to the genius of Theobald Boehm of Munich (1794-1881), a flutist, composer, and inventor, that we owe credit for the modern flute used today.

The flute as we now know it was conceived in 1846. After many experiments with the tube itself, and the size and position of the toneholes in relation to it, Boehm produced the modern flute. It had a parabolic, or tapered headjoint, a cylindrical body, and large toneholes covered by keys. He experimented with almost every material available. In 1847, he introduced his first flutes made of silver and German silver (a white alloy of copper, zinc, and nickel.) At this time, the wooden flute was still preferred by players over metal instruments, and remained so until the early 20th century. It is interesting to note that, although the flute is thousands of years old, the instrument we know today was developed within a period of approximately 50 years, and was chiefly the work of one person, Theobald Boehm.

### IS THE FLUTE DIFFICULT TO LEARN?

Most anyone, with practice, can learn to play the flute: the instrument described as being most closely related to the human voice. It is important to learn proper breathing techniques and breath support at the onset of playing so that a proper embouchure (lip formation) can be developed. Most teachers suggest that only the flute headjoint be used at first when attempting to make initial sounds. The headjoint must vibrate in order for the sound to be produced; if a student is unable to make a sound with the headjoint, putting the instrument together will not help. Some dizziness is common during the early stages of playing: this happens because beginner players have to learn the proper combination of embouchure [mouth] opening and air stream. This will go away as breath control is learned and is nothing to worry about. Keeping a chair handy and reminding the student to place his head between his knees until the feeling goes away is all that is necessary. Since the flute is held across the body and not in front, it is difficult to see where the fingers are to be placed. It is recommended that one hold the flute in front so the new player can see correct finger placement without having to blow at the same time. Practicing finger combinations without worrying about sound production can help a student to develop the proper "feel" for the keys.

### CHOOSING THE PROPER INSTRUMENT

The regular concert flute (C flute) comes in "one-size-fits-all." Unlike the violin, there are no graduated sizes to fit students as they grow. The entry-level flute has the same size finger placement as the professional model. Most young players, however, do not experience insurmountable problems. As mentioned earlier, the young student who has difficulty reaching the keys because of the instrument's length should start with a flute that offers a curved-style headjoint. This headjoint positions the flute body and keys within the reach of

smaller players. As the young flutist grows, a change to the regular straight headjoint can be made. The band director or flute teacher can assist parents with this decision.

### **FLUTE FINANCES**

Flutes vary in price, depending upon the model and material. It is extremely important for the beginner student to have a high-quality, entry-level instrument. Nothing will discourage a new player more quickly than an instrument that even a professional flutist can hardly make play. Buying a used instrument or "bargain basement" flute without consulting a professional flutist is ill-advised, as you may be wasting your money. Badly made flutes encourage early student dropouts from band programs.

Most good entry-level flutes are priced in the \$600 range for a plateau (closed-hole) model. French models (open-hole) cost approximately \$150 more. Originally, the open-hole flutes designed by French flutemakers was thought to produce a better sound and also to offer opportunities for using "trick" fingerings for trills and improving pitch of some notes [by pressing the key and leaving the hole in the center of the key open]. Many teachers feel that starting a player on the open-hole model helps to provide discipline with regard to finger placement as well. While not necessary, it is something to consider for all but the smallest players.

"Step-up" flutes range in price from \$1,200 to \$3,000, depending upon the amount of precious material used. These flutes may have sterling silver headjoint and/or tube with silver plated keys; many have a hand-cut embouchure (mouthpiece). Professional models range from \$5,000 to \$30,000, with pricing dependent upon options and whether the flute is made of sterling silver, solid gold, or platinum.

For many beginners, a good alternative to outright purchase is the rental-purchase plan. Most rental programs allow for part or the entire rental fee to apply towards the purchase price when you eventually buy the flute.

### **WHERE TO BUY YOUR FLUTE**

There are many options available for purchasing new flutes: your local music store, a mail-order music company, a shop specializing in flutes, or someone selling a used one. When making your decision, first consider the availability of service. Buying your instrument from a local dealer that has a fine flute repair person is important, as repairs and key/pad adjustments are needed from time to time. If you choose to use a mail-order company, inquire about their repair operation and if any is available locally. Shipping an instrument back to a mail-order company for repair work can be costly and take a great deal of time. Have a qualified flute repair person thoroughly check over any used instrument you may be considering.

### **WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A FLUTE**

Entry-level flutes are made from nickel silver and are then silver plated, although a few are nickel plated. Most players prefer the less slippery silver plated models. Ribbed construction is recommended, as post and key mechanisms can be fastened to the rib [a strip of metal attached to the tube] and not directly on the body tube itself. Rolled tone hole flutes offer a better pad-seating surface than the straight, faced only, tone holes. The three sections of the flute should fit together snugly, but not overly tight. Spring-wire tension should be even, so all keys have the same balanced feel under the fingers. A flute that requires a different amount of strength to push each key can contribute to bad technique; these should be adjusted before purchase.

It is most important to be certain that all pads cover the tone holes properly and without air leaks. Leaking, out-of-adjustment pads and keys make any flute unplayable. Finally, the flute headjoint is critical to the sound of the flute. Fortunately, most first-line manufacturers offer good headjoints on their beginner models today. A good flute outfit consists of the instrument, case, and cleaning rod. Some manufacturers include a soft cleaning cloth.

### **CARE AND MAINTENANCE**

All musical instruments require maintenance from time to time. Have your authorized flute repair person check the flute over at least once a year. Pads may require some adjustment to insure a proper seal and may occasionally need replacement. Key oiling should only be administered by an expert, as excess oil will cause keys to become sluggish.

Every flutist should wipe off the outside of the instrument when daily practice has been completed. A soft cloth such as an old, lint-free cotton flannel (not polyester) or specially designed silver cleaning cloth should be used. The inside of the tube should also be swabbed out by inserting a cloth through the slotted end of the cleaning rod that is provided with the flute [do not use the same cloth\_an old, soft cotton handkerchief



works well]. Clean the inside of all three flute sections. Most music stores sell flute cleaning swabs that may be used instead of the cleaning rod.

**Health note:** if a student has a cold or other virus or bacteria, it is advisable to swab out the inside of the instrument with some rubbing alcohol or other disinfectant so that he does not re-infect himself. Do not, however, spray the instrument \_- simply dampen the cleaning cloth and run the swab through all three sections of the instrument. Use an alcohol pad to clean the lip plate.



### **HAVE FUN**

Playing the flute can be a very joyful experience, and is something that can (and should) be done throughout a lifetime. Keep playing after graduation from school; do not relegate the flute to the attic! Let the flute, with its vast music repertoire, be your companion as you take life's journey. Remember that the flute is played by males and females of all ages. There is something for everyone when it comes to playing the flute, whether you play in the school band or orchestra, a community orchestra, an adult flute choir, or simply serenade your cat in your condo. Play the flute \_ you'll be glad you did!

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Editor's Note: "How to Buy a Flute" is the fourth in a series of instructional guides on the history and use of musical instruments. SBO grants permission to photocopy and distribute the article to both students and parents.