

Tone: the Good, the Bad, and how to get the Best

For many flute players, tone is the hardest part of technique to achieve. A flute player with good execution can still fail to please a crowd for lack of a good tone, while the simplest melody can be wholly satisfying if played in good tone. However, deciding what is good and bad is largely subjective; while we all might agree that someone has a bad tone, it is much more difficult to pinpoint what makes good tone, or how to achieve it. This lesson will explain the meaning of tone, as we understand it, common problems when developing your tone, and exercises to improve it.

Tone

Tone is composed of several different layers, but can basically be broken down into the characteristics of the sound produced by your flute. Tone has three basic elements: support, shape, and resonance. Support includes the use of all muscles, not just the diaphragm. Muscles like the back and abdominal are involved in the production of a good tone, because they control your posture, which affects your air flow. The arm muscles are another forgotten part of tone support. Letting the flute droop affects your embouchure and makes it more difficult to aim the air directly across the hole. The shape of your tone is affected mostly by the embouchure, which determines the fullness or thinness of your sound. Air expands as you exhale, so each person must determine for themselves the right amount to blow across the hole and the right amount to direct downward into the instrument. Finally, resonance comes after the first two areas, support and shape, have been developed. Resonance is the concentration of air and sound in one area of the body of the flute. It can be changed at will and makes a big difference in the sound of the instrument. This is often referred to as the "colour" of the tone, and can be described as "rich, thick, sweet, vibrant" etc.

Common problems

Tone is something that must be practiced and developed, so don't get discouraged if after six months of solid practice you still haven't achieved a pure, crisp tone. There are several common problems that dilute your tone quality, including fuzziness, hollowness, and a shrill, high register. In the next section, we will discuss easy ways to clean up and focus your tone, as well as develop one with more depth.

How to Produce a Good Tone

Good tone starts with the embouchure. It is important to keep the lips in as natural a position as possible. Begin by closing your lips naturally and tightening them closer to your face. Force air between your lips, once you have placed the mouthpiece to your mouth and adjusted it. The opening in the lips should be slight and focused, producing a flat airstream as opposed to a round one that you might make when learning to whistle.

Vibrato is one of the most debated areas of tone quality, with opinions that it should not be included in the definition of tone to opinions that it is "the icing on the cake" when it comes to tone. Vibrato is produced when air circulates so fast in your diaphragm that when it comes out, it produces a slight variation in pitch, though the player is playing one steady note. It is fairly difficult to produce naturally, and usually comes from a player's conscious decision to create it by tightening and relaxing the throat. It is important to let

vibrato happen naturally, and not to use it to cover a bad tone; it is obvious when faked, and it adds little to your style unless it is real. When you do produce vibrato naturally, however, it adds great depth and style to your tone.

To avoid the most common tone problem, fuzziness, or breathiness, there are two easy things to try. First, maintain a tight embouchure. Relaxing your lips can not only change the shape of the air flow, but allow extra air to escape through the corners of your mouth, diffusing the sound and making it appear fuzzy and unfocused. Second, check to see that enough air is going down into the flute and not across it-as you blow across the flute, some of the air should go across the hole, while the rest of it should go into the instrument.

The best way to improve your tone is to simply practice. Practice long scales, holding each note until you need another breath. Begin softly, then increase intensity and volume until you are almost out of air, and finally fade off, making sure to push air all the way through to avoid sounding flat at the end. As you play each note, listen for clarity and purity of sound-you shouldn't hear your own breath or a change in pitch. With these simple exercises, you can easily improve your tone quality!