

Looking after the Flute (Nov 2020)

Cleaning the instrument

If dust or fluff does gather on the instrument then gently brush it away with an (unused) shaving brush or small (10-20 mm) width (unused) paint brush.

- Occasionally polish the instrument (using a silver cleaning cloth) particularly the embouchure plate, the keys, the area where you rest your right thumb, and the tenons and sockets (this will prolong the life of the silver plating).

- Once a month use a precision screwdriver (if you feel competent enough) to gently check the screws at either end of the key rods are not loose (do not adjust any tiny screws found at the back or to the side of the individual keys).

- If the pads become sticky do the following: -use pad cleaning papers to clean the pads - dab on a little Methylated spirits onto the paper with a cotton bud, place the paper under the key pad, hold the key lightly closed and pull the paper through; now that the pad is clean place a sheet of powder paper under the pad, hold the key lightly closed and pull the paper through.

Some players find that their instrument tarnishes quickly – this can sometimes be the result of leaving the instrument out of its case for long periods of time (particularly if it is left in direct sunlight) but sometimes it seems to be caused by the breath or sweat of the player (in the same way some people have problems wearing certain jewellery). Tarnishing does prevent the instrument playing properly – a player will be able to remove tarnish from most of the flute with a silver cloth; inaccessible areas can only be cleaned by a repairer when the instrument is serviced.

The tuning rod

The tuning rod is a long thin rod that is usually supplied with the Flute and has its own resting place in the Flute case. At one end of the rod is a slit, and at the other end there is a notch (about 1 cm from the end). The primary function of the rod is to check that the head cork in the head-joint is in the right position: gently insert the notched end of the rod into the head-joint until it contacts the head cork plate, look into the embouchure hole and check the notch is in the centre of the hole (make sure you are standing directly under a light when doing this or you might get a false reading), if the notch is not in the centre of the embouchure hole then the head cork needs replacing. The secondary function of the rod is to enable swabbing or cleaning of the bore: for swabbing - thread a sheet of paper towel through the slit; for cleaning - cut a small piece of silver cloth (about 100mm x 100mm) and thread this through the slit in the rod; swab or clean the bore of the head-joint, body, and foot-joint.

Flute stands

Some players find the chore of assembling and dis-assembling a Flute can prevent them practicing. If the Flute is placed on a stand after playing it can be left assembled and it will drain properly (although it is vulnerable to being knocked over). If the stand is to be kept at home, buy the largest possible because this will be the most stable; if the stand needs to be used at performances as well as at home, then a smaller stand that fits inside the case, case cover, or body of the instrument, might be better. Children might be better off placing the instrument under their bed (resting with the holes pointing upwards), the instrument won't drain effectively but it might be played more often and won't get knocked over.

In performances it is best for the player to keep hold of their Flute (rather than place it on a stand) with the *holes facing upwards* and the instrument tilted down (so the foot-joint lower than the head-joint); doing this will help the instrument drain and also keep it warm so it stays in tune.

Cases and case covers

Flutes are easily damaged and an instrument case that holds the flute snugly is essential. The keys will be bent if the instrument can move in the case while being carried. Nothing else should be kept in the case unless there is a specific compartment for it, although it is best to have a tenon cleaning cloth to wipe the tenons before assembly – it is usually possible to store a small square of Silver cloth (50mm x 50mm) under the head-joint; do not store the whole cloth on top of the instrument unless the instrument is actually loose in the case without it!

Servicing the instrument

The instrument should be serviced regularly to ensure it is operating correctly. The pads, corks, and felts on the instrument (and also the adhesives which keeps these items in place) deteriorate over time. On older or poorer quality instruments the mechanism itself starts to wear and keys can become loose or jammed. Usually such deterioration is gradual and the player subconsciously compensates by blowing harder and pressing harder on the keys. Without servicing the deterioration continues - the quality of tone diminishes, the instrument becomes less responsive, and the tuning becomes unreliable; the deterioration continues until something major goes wrong and the instrument becomes unplayable and in need of considerable repair.

As a general guide to the frequency of servicing - if you have one main woodwind instrument and you are under grade 5 (or have been playing less than 5 years) you should have the instrument serviced approximately every two years, if you are above grade 5 (or have been playing more than 5 years) then you should have the instrument serviced approximately once a year. If you have more than one main woodwind instrument then each instrument probably gets used less often so you can go longer between services. If you are doing exams on the instrument it is best to at least have the instrument checked a couple of months before an exam so that you know it is working reliably when you go into the exam; players often blame themselves for the poor sound they produce when actually the instrument is at fault. The first indication that a Flute needs servicing is usually when the player starts having problems playing the Low C by using the Low C touch-piece only. Test your Flute with the following exercises, in all cases you should be able to play the notes without squeezing the keys hard or blowing hard: C to Bb using thumb key; B to A; A to G; G to F#; G to F; Low D to Low C.

Adjusting to your instrument if it has just been serviced:

When an instrument is overdue a service the player has to compensate for the instrument's various problems. You have probably developed habits of pressing harder on the keys, and blowing harder, and manipulating your embouchure as necessary to help tune the notes. You may not even have been aware that you were doing these things. You now need to stop compensating for the problems you were having with the instrument – therefore you need to break the habits you have developed. The easiest way to do this is to spend the first 10 minutes of your next two or three practices working on (easy) scales and arpeggios only; use a light finger pressure and a light breath pressure and try to play softly. If you do not practice scales and arpeggios then practice some easy pieces of music so you can concentrate on your fingers and breath pressure rather than the notes.

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