

SUCCESS IN LEARNING AND PLAYING THE FLUTE

By Mikki Steyn

This article is geared towards students learning the flute.

Success in learning to play the flute depends on a number of things:

- ❖ Your instrument
- ❖ The effort you put in (and I'm not referring to the number of hours you put into practising your flute, I am referring to what you put into the hours)
- ❖ Your teacher
- ❖ Your health and fitness level
- ❖ Your love for the flute and it's music
- ❖ Last, but certainly not least, your flute specialist

Your Instrument

There is a saying: "It's a poor workman who blames his tools". I have to say I'm not sure in which situations this saying would apply, what I do know, however, is that it certainly doesn't apply to the flute.

NOTE: I am not referring to a situation where a student who doesn't practise look at the instrument as if that is where the fault lies!

I am talking in general terms, assuming that the student has a teacher who knows what he/she is doing and assuming that the student practises regularly.

I can tell you, one of the things that drives me up the walls, is when I get a phone call from someone who very excitedly enquires about flute lessons and then informs me proudly that they have just purchased a flute at the music shop around the corner for R2,000 or R3,000. This may seem like a true bargain, and there is the odd chance that the person found a gem. More often than not, however, such a flute would be difficult to play (producing a good flute tone), would have a noisy mechanism and probably not play in tune, however hard the student might try.

Over the years I have had students who bought flutes from many different shops in South Africa. I have experienced excellent service from all of these shops. None of these flutes compares, however, to the flutes my students bought from Michael Botha. The fine tuning of a flute is an ART! I am not going to elaborate too much on this matter. Elsewhere on this website Mike explains why one should consider very carefully before you buy a flute out of the box from a music shop.

What I would like to mention, though, is that in the rehearsals just before my students played their ABRSM exams in November 2008, the pianist made an interesting observation. I had 10 students playing and he commented that it is interesting that some students played so much more in tune and had such a better tone than others, pointing out that it was not related to the level they played at or the number of years they've been playing. So I asked him to point out to me which students he was talking about. Interestingly enough all the students he singled out played on flutes bought from Mike and most of them played on MCB head-joints!

Your Effort

This part of the process is very simple. What you put in is what you get out. It does not take a genius to understand that flute playing involves muscle memory, which means that the more you play your flute, the more skilful and flexible you will become in terms of sound production, sound and tone colour manipulation and fluent technical facility.

If you don't practise, flute playing is hard work. If you practise, it becomes an enjoyable activity, which has a snowball effect. The better you become the more you would want to play, and you will improve even more, and so on...

Your Teacher

It is very important that you find a teacher who knows what he/she is doing. What do I mean by this?

- ❖ The teacher must be well-schooled in different styles of music and know about performance practices relating to the different styles.
- ❖ The teacher must know as much as possible about the flute: acoustic principles, different flute makes, and what to do when something goes wrong.
- ❖ The teacher must know how the human body and mind works and be aware that each individual's body and mind works slightly differently. Individualised teaching is very important in flute teaching.
- ❖ The teacher must understand issues relating to performances for concerts and examinations and be sensitive to issues such as stage fright. Needless to say, he/she must know how to approach and deal with this, should a student experience stage fright.

Your Health and Fitness Level

Healthy eating habits and regular exercise will be most beneficial to your flute playing. Yoga is also something to consider and there is a lot of information relating to flute playing and yoga on the internet. Just google "flute yoga".

Love the Flute and It's Music

In order to be successful at playing the flute, you must truly love the instrument, the way it feels when you play it, its tone, the music written for it, and listening to other people playing the flute. It is very important that the instrument you play matches who you are.

Your Flute Specialist

For those of you who are animal lover's you will know that your vet is one of the most important people in your life. Equally, it is very important to find someone whom you can rely on and trust with your flute. Believe me this is very important when you are serious about your flute!

-----oOo-----