

Three things to do at a bus-stop

Niall O’Riordan *on improving your playing while you’re doing “nothing”*



The average person can spend five years of their life waiting. This amounts to roughly an hour each day just waiting — and for some people it can be much more. The next time you find yourself waiting for a bus or waiting in line, why not be productive with this time and try out some ideas that could help your practice while you wait? You will need to become familiar with them first in the privacy of your own home. You can also incorporate them into your daily practice routine. Take time, be gentle and never strain. Be inquisitive with each process. When you become familiar with them you could explore parts of them next time you’re waiting in line.

When you’re doing “nothing”, why not try working on: balance, fingering control, and relaxing your tongue?

Balance

How your body is balanced is vital for every aspect of playing the flute; it affects your breathing in the most remarkable ways. If you are well-organised in space and have good balance you will have better breathing. One role of the skeleton is to work against gravity to keep you upright, but all too often due to poor posture we engage in extra muscular effort to compensate for poor physical organisation. Extra muscles begin to adopt the function of the skeleton in keeping the body erect; therefore, because these muscles are now actively engaged, they are no longer available for their natural function. This limits our movement. The extra effort becomes so habitual we are not even aware that we are doing it. By restoring balance in the system this extra effort can be released providing you with easier movement and freer breathing.

- Become aware of your breathing and how you are standing.
- Without making any changes, enquire if your balance is favouring one foot or if it is spread equally between left and right.
- Begin slowly to shift your weight from left to right several times. Are your knees locked or softly bent? Allow them to soften.
- Imagine through the top of your head a laser beam is drawing a line in the ceiling as you shift your weight from left to right. Can you feel where you passed through the centre and where the weight is evenly balanced between both feet?
- Is your hold trunk moving together in harmony?
- Do you experience lengthening or shortening in your spine as you move?
- Gradually decrease the distance of movement so that you eventually come to rest in the centre. You can use the imagery of a pendulum swaying from side to side and eventually coming to rest in stillness in the middle.
- Rest and observe any changes in how you are balanced and any changes in your breathing.
- Become aware of your feet and their contact with the ground. Where is the weight placed? Is it more towards your toes or is it located at your heels?
- Using the same imagery of the laser beam through the top of your head, this time move your weight forward and backwards.
- Allow your knees to be soft and let your breathing be free and easy. Allow your whole body to be engaged in the movement.
- Gradually decrease the distance of movement so that you eventually come to rest in the centre.
- Rest and observe any changes in your balance and your breathing.

Fingers

Refined control of each finger without any parasitic effort is vital for good finger technique. This exploration increases awareness and sensitivity of the fingers; it also helps free the shoulders.

- With your hand by your side begin to move a finger as if playing a very slow trill.
- Try and sense how this finger connects through your arm and into your trunk.
- Without looking ask yourself if there is any movement from other fingers.
- Check and see if your sensory awareness was accurate. If there was any movement from the other fingers try and minimise or eliminate it.
- Make the movement free and easy and remember to breathe - don't hold your breath
- Gradually increase the speed until you have a feeling of playing a fast light trill.
- It should feel easy and light. If this is not so, go slower with more sensitivity
- Do this with each finger in turn. Take plenty of rests and don't strain

Tongue

A lot of tension can build up in the tongue. Many flute players over-articulate and this leads to a lot of held tension. Some articulation problems may not be due to the tongue at all, but can be from a lack of finger coordination, general tension in the neck, chest and arms, an unfocused airstream or just not enough air. Most of us can speak very well and the tongue does a marvellous job at it. For its size it is the strongest muscle in the body. So the idea of strengthening the tongue is not a concept I totally agree with. I do however agree that we can refine our movement of the tongue by improving our sensory awareness.



Image: Danny O'Riordan

The tongue and the hands have a surprisingly close neurological relationship. As the foetus develops, the hands and the tongue are joined, later separating off from each other. They are both highly represented in our sensory system where they are also very near each other. Tension in the tongue can lead to tension in the fingers and vice versa. Be inquisitive about the link between tongue tension and finger tension.

Releasing the tongue can be very beneficial to the fingers, too. A lot of improvement can be achieved away from the flute. I've been doing this for years. People generally will avoid eye contact with you if you explore aspects of these lessons in public and you might even get some very strange glances, but I've become comfortable with that. And to those of you with hopes of meeting your soul mate at a bus stop, you can forget about it: you will look very unattractive, but perhaps you can serenade somebody with your beautiful flute playing instead?

- Open your mouth and see how it feels. Repeat several times and see if can you make it easier each time.
- Make soft fists with your hands and released them several times. Allow your hands to soften more each time you release them.
- Open your mouth again and see how it feels now.
- Imagine that the tip of your tongue is a paintbrush. Beginning with a molar tooth on the bottom right side of your mouth and slowly start to explore the surface area of this tooth as if painting it. NB It is most important that you go slowly without strain. If it is difficult for you or it feels uncomfortable pick a tooth you can reach easily without any strain, it should feel easy and pleasurable. Be aware of any unnecessary effort you are using in your tongue, jaw, face or anywhere else in your body and begin to reduce it. Can you do this in a way that feels light and easy?
- Continue to explore each tooth until you come to your bottom front teeth. Remember to breathe and never hold your breath. Take as much rest as you need in between.
- Rest and observe any changes in sensation in your mouth and tongue. How do both sides of your mouth compare?
- Repeat the process in the bottom left side
- Rest and again notice any subtle changes in sensation
- Repeat the process on the top right side
- Rest
- Repeat the process on the top left side
- Open your mouth. How does it feel now? How does your tongue feel? Have any changes taken place elsewhere in your body? How do you shoulders and hands feel?

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