



5th World Conference on Learning, Teaching and Educational Leadership, WCLTA 2014

Approaches and Teaching Methods in Breathing and Vibrato Technique in Flute Education

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Abstract

Vibrato is one of the main techniques which gives depth, colour, and even vitality to the instrument it is played with. Using the vibrato technique accurately and efficiently requires a thorough recognition of the musical piece which is played, knowledge about the musical style, being a good listener and a good researcher. The students who receive flute education at university level have certain difficulties when making use of the breathing technique and the vibrato technique. The aim of the present study is to analyze different teaching methods and approaches which are applied for the accurate and efficient use of the breathing and the vibrato technique. In this study, literature review and survey methods have been applied. Academic articles, books, journals, thesis, and online resources were reviewed within the scope of literature review. Based on the data which were obtained from the "Flute Pedagogy Survey", the opinions of the academicians in Turkey and the USA have been evaluated. At the end of the study, it has been observed that many famous flute performers and academicians have different points of views about the breathing and the vibrato techniques. It has been concluded that one of the common views that the flute instructors both in Turkey and the USA share is the necessity of studying the vibrato technique as a separate subject. They also think that the musical work which is played could show variety according to the period it belongs to. In the conclusions part of the study, the vibrato technique and different approaches in teaching methods have been analyzed comparatively and proposals for probable problems that may emerge during the teaching process have been developed.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center

Keywords: Flute Pedagogy, Music Education, Vibrato, Breathing Technique

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1. Introduction

Breathing and vibrato technique are commonly argued subjects among flutists and academicians. Although breathing is a natural action for all of us, it is a crucial technique to be developed and controlled for flutists. Breathing is one of the fundamental techniques for students who receive professional flute education. Students who cannot comprehend this main technique have difficulty in utilizing vibrato technique which is expected to be learnt and developed by the students in their further education.

In the book entitled *The Art of Flute Playing* Putnik (1973) stressed that there are two principal factors in proper breathing for the flutist: sufficient quantity of air and support to ensure a steady air stream. Moreover, Galway (1982) states that one should improve three things for a good breathing technique: the quantity of breath, control of it and economical use of it. He refers that there are three sorts of breath. First, there is the deep breath which you have a lot of time to take before beginning to play or in any handy couple of bars' rest. The second sort of breathing which he calls bridge breath is a quick little breath that you take frequently to get you to a convenient spot of full recovery. The third type of breath differs from the bridge breath in being even shorter, quicker and more covert such as inserting micro-breath into a series of repeated staccato notes.

In his book *How to Love Your Flute* Shepard (1999) defines correct breathing as following: diaphragm muscle that normally stands horizontally is pushed downward when a deep breath is taken causing the abdominal wall distended. Diaphragm muscle is also effective when exhaling the breath and it contracts the air in the lungs thus the abdominal wall is kept in again.

In her doctoral dissertation Pearson (2006) explains which muscles and organs are used and how and to what extend they are used in breathing. She concludes that the diaphragm does about 75% of the muscular work while the intercostal muscles (muscles between the ribs) do about 25% of the work. Besides, the lungs hold the air and the abdominal wall (360° around the body) and pelvic floor work synergistically with the diaphragm. Lastly, the spine supports the breathing structures and lengthens and gathers reflexively.

Toff (1996) explains breathing as a three-step process: inhalation, suspension, and exhalation. She gives the following advice:

“For the first step inhalation, relax your abdomen, open your mouth and throat and inhale through your mouth. Open your mouth as if saying “ah” in order to allow air to pass through quickly. Allow the air to fill your abdominal cavity so that the middle torso expands at both front and back. All other parts of your body particularly the shoulders and the chest should remain stationary...The second step, suspension is the preparation for exhalation. When you have filled your lungs to full capacity, hold the full position momentarily; the torso should remain expanded and the throat open while you set the diaphragm and abdominal wall muscles for exhalation. The suspension provides the muscular support that must last for the full duration of the tone...The third stage is the most important of all since exhalation activates the air column in the flute and thereby generates the tone. Exhalation requires the most control and this control is provided by tension between the diaphragm and the muscles of the abdominal wall and chest cavity. Try to keep your rib cage wall expanded while simultaneously allowing the abdominal wall to contract toward its rest position. As the abdominal muscles press against the base of the lungs, the air is forced out”.

Finding a good place to breathe without detuning the musical structure is as important as correct breathing technique. Beginner students should be encouraged to mark the places for their breathing and observe the marks as soon as possible in their study. Breath should be taken in accordance with the musical phrase, in rests and after the longest note available. When determining where to breathe, it is better to break a slur (not a tie) than to break the rhythm. Also breathing before the last note or two of a phrase should be avoided (Putnik, 1973).

There are different opinions about learning vibrato and its effect on efficient breathing. Several flutists felt that vibrato instruction is a hindrance to breathing while another mentioned that it enhances breathing (Holm, 1997). Either way breathing and vibrato technique affect each other directly.

Debost (2002) defines vibrato as a modulation in the pitch of the flute tone, making it rise and fall in a more or less controlled fashion. According to Toff (1996) there are three basic types of vibrato: pitch, intensity and timbre. In pitch vibrato, the pitch fluctuates both above and below the starting note, on A-440. For instance, it varies between 438 and 442 frequencies per second. Intensity vibrato on the other hand is a fluctuation in the dynamic level. The combination of pitch vibrato and intensity vibrato is called the timbre vibrato.

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