

Flute Playing Tips and Techniques

Welcome to the ever-growing group of Native American style flute owners. The ease of play for the musical novice or the seasoned music maker, the beauty of the woods used in crafting and the hauntingly beautiful sounds they produce, make these flutes cherished possessions. They are also very powerful instruments due to the consciousness altering effects to both the listener and the player.

After a few playing techniques are reasonably mastered, the thought process can be bypassed and the player's "inner guidance" can take over the fingers, allowing spontaneous improvised melodies to issue forth. One may suddenly realize that a never before heard song has just come forth.

You may find it difficult to allow the "inner guidance" to take over if you have an audience, due to the fear of not being "impressive" enough. I encourage you to go for it anyway and just do your best without worrying about any possible critics in the audience or in your head.

As mentioned earlier, its very simple to play these instruments and to produce pleasant melodies. Other types of flutes require all sorts of mouth contortions just to produce a note, which is not the case with the Native American style flute. A surprisingly small amount of air flow is required to produce a note.

A common error of first time players is blowing too hard into the flute, causing it to unintentionally shift into the higher octave or produce distorted notes. Experiment with the air flow to achieve the sweetest note. Another common error that will cause distorted notes is due to not completely covering the holes. This may be due to the distance between the holes being too great for the size of your hand or inattention to the placement of your fingers. The hole should be centered on the pad, not the tip, of each playing finger. Only light finger pressure is required, you don't have to white knuckle it!

Your flute is tuned to a pentatonic scale, which is the reason all of the notes go together harmoniously when played in either ascending or descending order. Starting with all holes covered, using the three largest fingers of both hands, blow softly into the flute to achieve a steady tone. This is the lowest note your flute will produce. Then beginning with hole one, (the hole nearest the foot of the flute) lift each finger successively and work your way up and down the scale. Notice that a slight increase in air flow is required on the higher notes to maintain a "sweet" note. You can also lift or lower multiple fingers simultaneously.

If your flute is a six hole design, it is necessary to keep either hole three or four covered while playing the other five holes to maintain a pentatonic scale. Flutes can also be constructed in a five hole design by deleting either hole three or four from the six hole design. By including both hole three and four in the six hole version the player has the option of playing in either of two pentatonic modes. If your flute is a five hole design, play all of the holes up and down the scale to maintain a pentatonic scale. You may want to experiment by raising and lowering fingers in a non-pentatonic order to come up with some new notes to add to your flute playing pleasure.

When blowing air into the flute, it works well to regulate the amount of air flow by using the diaphragm and the tip of the tongue. The diaphragm can be steadily contracted while using the tip of the tongue against the roof of the mouth to regulate the air flowing into the flute. The tip of the tongue can be used to momentarily block the air flow to create little bursts of air for producing interesting effects. The diaphragm can be made to rapidly contract and relax to produce a beautiful vibrating or vibrato effect. Experiment to find what is pleasing to your ears and go for it !

The wooden fetish tied atop the flute is designed to be both beautiful and functional. It is an integral part of the sound producing apparatus which includes the channel under the fetish, the rectangular hole in front of the fetish and the slanted breast or chin of the fetish. The rectangular hole is referred to as the true sound hole. Care must be taken to avoid damaging the narrow edge located at the foot end of this hole. This narrow edge splits the air stream flowing under the fetish and initializes the sound production.

The fetish is securely tied atop the flute and is designed to allow position adjustments to slightly change the playing characteristics of the flute. It should normally be positioned with the front/bottom edge within one-eighth inch of the edge of the true sound hole and aligned with the centerline of the flute body. Slight variations in the position of the fetish will cause changes in the amount of air flow needed to produce an octave shift on the lower notes and will also allow an overall tuning adjustment.

Your flute has been sealed and finished for beauty and longevity. By following a few guidelines, you can be the happy owner of this flute for many years to come. Since it is made of wood, care should be taken to avoid crushing, scratching or excessive exposure to the elements.

As the flute is being played, moisture may begin to build up in the chamber beyond the mouth hole and under the fetish in the air channel. This is due to warm moist air from your lungs condensing as it moves through the flute. After prolonged playing, enough moisture may build up under the fetish to effect the air flow and give the flute a burbling sound. This moisture buildup can be removed by blowing a quick strong burst of air into the mouth hole or by holding the flute near the foot end and slinging the moisture out. This should be done after you have finished playing to remove as much moisture as possible. The flute should then be left out of its case to allow the remainder to evaporate before storing. During this time do not lay the flute on its side to prevent moisture from pooling along the glue joint.

I hope you find these tips and techniques useful and may you enjoy playing your flute as much as I did making it!