

Making a Positive First * Impression in an Audition:
A “Top Ten” Checklist for the Opening Phrase of the Mozart G Major Concerto
(“Good is in the Details”)

By
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****And Lasting***



1. Are you playing the very first note, G, too shyly because of its tendency to crack? Try tonguing it a little softer but at the same time be more assertive with your air pressure.
2. Are you keeping a strict tempo, or are you dragging the first two bars, then suddenly speeding up the descending 16th note passage?
3. Are your middle D's in the first bar sharp and the following high D's flat?
4. Has your dotted 8th and 16th rhythm deteriorated into a triplet rhythm? But if not, then are you mumbling the 16th pickup instead of giving it a nice crisp articulation?
5. In the descending 16th passage, are you rushing the two-note slurs? But if not, are you then putting an unnecessary accent on the first note of each slur?
6. In the same 16th passage are you making the detached 16ths too soft compared to the slurred 16ths? And is your overall dynamic level weakening as you reach the lower C and B? (Imagine a crescendo to offset that common tendency.)
7. In bar 3 are you forgetting to slur from the quarter-note D to the C trill? But if not, are you then guilty of diminishing the D rather than having it lead steadily into the C trill?
8. For the C trill have you considered trilling the first trill key with your first finger instead of your second finger, thus eliminating a jerky wrist repositioning?
9. Are you adding the traditional turn (B-C grace notes) after the trill? In doing so, are you avoiding suddenly diminishing or stopping the trill, then accenting the first grace note?
10. Are you playing a properly held, firm-sounding quarter-note B on the downbeat of bar 4, and avoiding a premature diminuendo on that note? (Don't worry. You won't drown out the horn entrance.)

Detailed Commentary on the “Top Ten” Checklist

1. To achieve a more consistent “crack-free” control of your middle G attack, practice a series of middle G's with forte breath attacks (no tonguing). Then practice with tongue strokes, experimenting with different degrees of softness or hardness until you find the optimum combination of breath and tongue pressure. Also, in order to fulfill Mozart's *maestoso* marking, try to shape all the quarter-notes and the dotted 8th note in such a way that each note has a quick vibrato and a very subtle half-taper similar to that of a bell-tone. (In Arthur Weisberg's book, *The Art of Wind Playing*, these half-tapers are aptly called “resonant endings”). Superimposed on these bell-tone type quarters should be an overall crescendo toward the first high D (but avoiding over-accenting the high D) followed by a *poco* diminuendo on the half-note C that properly sets the stage for a second crescendo on the descending 16th notes. (The quarter-notes in bars 37-40 of the first movement of the Mozart D Major Concerto also benefit from this kind of shaping, thereby remedying the blandness that too often typify these phrases.)

2. Lack of discipline in tempo steadiness is a recurring fault with too many musicians, and this seems to be especially true in Mozart performances, where melodic phrases tend to lag and technical phrases run away (the 16ths in bars 59-60 in the D Major Concerto first movement being arguably the most notorious example). Metronome practice helps, though it's certainly not a panacea. But recording your practice sessions, then carefully listening to playbacks while simulating a conductor's beat is often a more effective feedback method for attaining long-lasting success.

3. Regrettably, there has been an unmistakable trend in recent years for flutists to go sharp on middle D's (and sometimes on D#'s). The solidness and reliability of the response of the D makes it tempting for us to push the tone too hard, spoiling both the pitch and quality. The high D, on the other hand, can be flat on some flutes and therefore needs to be humored, but the flatness may also be caused by the headjoint cork being pulled out too far. It's important to check on that periodically.

4. For proper style, the dotted 8th should be played slightly shorter than its actual value to allow for the characteristic “lift” before the 16th note. Apropos of this, ask a violinist friend to demonstrate for you the “hooked-bow” technique that violinists almost always use for this rhythm in allegro tempos.

5. The so-called “two-and-two” (two-slurred, two-tongued) 16th note articulation is undoubtedly the most frequently used pattern by most composers since Mozart and Haydn, but sadly, it’s also the one that’s most often marred by inattentive performers who tend to play the two-note slur too quickly, creating an annoying gap between the second and third 16th notes. Again, listening to your playbacks will help you build up an immunity to this “little devil” (to borrow Michel Debost’s neat phrase).

6. Practice each four-note group in isolation, bringing out the two detached notes. Repeat twice. Then starting with the high D, play five notes, paying close attention again to the detached notes. Now start with the downbeat A and play five notes. (This group is a bit more challenging because the E’s are apt to crack.) Finally, start with the second E and play five notes. Repeat this sequence twice. Incidentally, this is an effective practice strategy for all the 16th passages in the first and third movements.



7. In your practicing, alternately sing (while conducting) and play the three quarter-notes, D-C-B, without the trill. Add some words for your singing. (A Phrygian mode “Three Blind Mice” would do nicely.)

8. Though we were all taught to trill the first trill key with the second finger and the second trill key with the third finger (since those are the necessary positions for fingering high Bb and B), I have found that I experience much less tension in the right hand if I play the trills the maverick way -- first finger for the first trill key and second finger for the second trill key. It’s especially advantageous when trilling both keys together. In fact, I’ve always had fun playing the high G#-A# trills this way in the coda of the Chaminade Concertino, but using wrist motion (the thumb and pinky not touching the flute) rather than finger motion, the wrist being noticeably faster than the fingers. However, for this to work, I support the flute exclusively with my left hand by propping my left thumb onto the B-key post while fingering high G#, thereby freeing my right thumb and pinky to ride along with the up-and-down wrist motion.

9. Realistically there is only enough time for two trills plus the turn, a total of seven notes. Thus the pattern would be



Visualizing these notes helps prevent unevenness in the trill and hesitation on the fifth note. For those of you who are desirous of improving your trill technique, my recent book, *The Articulate Flutist*, has 42 pages of trill exercises based on this “visualization” principle.

10. We all tend to get into the sloppy, unprofessional habit of not holding final notes of phrases or sections long enough. This can be especially irritating to the listener in an audition setting, especially when there’s no piano accompanist. Interestingly, a conductor sometimes in rehearsal will announce with exasperation, “Off on two!”, meaning that the beginning of her second beat will be the cutoff of her first beat. You can adopt a conductorless version of the same idea in your practicing by adding a re-attacked “stinger” 16th note after the quarter-note in bar 4. Then in performance you’ll be able to rely on that imaginary “stinger” as a silent goal post.

Coda. Careful study of the above commentary, even though it focuses only on the first four bars of the concerto, should make you freshly aware of the importance of paying attention to fine detail. Having this kind of probing mindset will allow you to perform with a better understanding of both the musical and technical aspects of all the pieces you’re preparing for auditions and performances.

Recommended Reading Concerning Style and Phrasing. Each of these important books is well worth studying from cover to cover, but the cited pages are the ones particularly relevant to this article:

Michel Debost: *The Simple Flute* (Oxford, 2002) pp. 113-28, 176-84, 243-50

Peter-Lukas Graf: *Interpretation: How to Shape a Melodic Line* (Schott, 2001) pp. 53-62 (esp. p. 55)

David McGill: *Sound in Motion* (Indiana University Press, 2007) pp. 130-59

Arthur Weisberg: *The Art of Wind Playing* (Schirmer Books, 1975) pp. 33-43