Baroque Performance Practices for the Modern Flutist

by Anita Miller Rieder

I have always felt an affinity for baroque music, but it wasn't until I was in graduate school that I discovered the baroque flute. Its pure tone and soft-edged articulation gave a whole new meaning to Bach sonatas and Couperin suites.

Learning to play the baroque flute made me feel like a beginner again. The tone production, tonguing technique, and fingerings are quite different from the modern flute. In many ways the challenges of the baroque flute have taught me how to play the repertoire. When playing baroque repertoire on the modern flute, I incorporate many ideas learned from the baroque flute. The following article addresses some of the style and technique issues of baroque flute that can be adapted to the modern flute.

RELEARNING THE FLUTE WITH BAROQUE TECHNIQUE

As modern flutists we strive to achieve uniform tone quality throughout the flute's ranges and to develop a big sound rich with harmonic overtones. Not so on the baroque flute. One of the most important differences between baroque and modern flutes is that each tone on the baroque flute is unique in terms of tone color and tone production. This is in part caused by the shape and size of the bore and the placement of the tone holes on the baroque flute. Unlike flutes with key mechanisms, the tone holes on baroque flute must lie within reach of the hands and there is no C venting hole for the left hand thumb. Eighteenth-century flute tutors usually contain a chapter concerning the different qualities of sharp, flat, and natural tones, and alternate fingerings that are more suitable for sharp and flat keys. The low register of the baroque flute, for instance, illustrates the variability of tone from one pitch to the next. The lowest note, D above middle C, has a strong bright tone, as does D sharp/E flat, while E is somewhat thin. F-natural is very thin and sharp and requires a much slower breath velocity, and F-sharp is extremely flat and requires an immediate surge in the air stream. This variety of tone quality and tone production continues throughout the registers, and this variability was considered aesthetically pleasing in the eighteenth century. Composers sought to exploit the colorful tones within a particular key for greater effect.

While the differences will be more difficult to perceive on the modern flute, especially those with the Cooper scale, it is possible to practice tone studies with the goal of developing different tone qualities from one note to the next. The following exercise was given to me by London baroque flutist Lisa Beznosiuk. The study begins on D above middle C, but one can begin on any note, using it as a home base against which all of the other tones are compared. Modern flutists will notice the greatest tonal differences on C-sharp/D-flat and D-sharp/E-flat in the second register. Rather than trying to make a note sound equally as strong as those
above and below it, dwell on its unique quality: is it veiled or velvety-sounding? fuzzy? sharp? flat? Do not use vibrato as you practice this exercise.

Exercise 1: Tone Study

Practice the same exercise with triplets and dotted rhythms and use a metronome to increase the tempo. Begin on a middle register note and extend an octave in both directions.

VIBRATO IS AN ORNAMENT

The tonal exercise above leads to the subject of vibrato. In general, vibrato is not used on the baroque flute, certainly not as a constant part of tone production. Vibrato is introduced, however, on long tones that provide the opportunity for a messa di voce, literally, “placing of the voice,” or dynamic swell. Eighteenth-century instrumentalists imitating singers added messa di voce on long notes at the middle and ends of phrases, particularly those held above suspensions. The increased tension caused by the dissonance on the note tied over the downbeat, the dynamic swell, and vibrato heightens the impact of the resolution to the consonant chord. This is especially effective on the baroque flute, which, unlike the baroque recorder, has the ability to make wide dynamic changes. While modern flute vibrato is produced internally through rapid changes in air speed and pressure, vibrato on the baroque flute is produced by a finger beating against an open tone hole, known as finger vibrato or battement. Finger vibrato is an option on modern flutes with open tone holes. For example, play middle register A while slowly trilling the key rim of either F, E, or D in the right hand. Each key produces a slightly different pitch variation, or “vibrato.” Gently accelerate and decelerate the trill while maintaining steady breath exhalation on the A. Experiment with other pitches to discover finger vibrato possibilities.

The technique of added vibrato can be adapted easily on the modern flute using breath vibrato, as well. The next exercise is adapted from the Moyse De la sonorité book. While the sudden dynamic bursts with vibrato may feel at first like being on a ship at sea with lurching waves, remember that this ornamental technique is adding tension and repose to the harmonic progression of a phrase.

Exercise 2: Messa di Voce/ Dynamic Swell with Vibrato

Steadily increase the volume; at the apex add vibrato and allow it to trail off as you decrescendo. Vary the number of beats to crescendo/diminuendo: four beats crescendo, four beats diminuendo, six beats, eight beats, etc. Practice on different pitches.
ALL TONGUING IS NOT CREATED EQUAL

The first time I read the chapter on tonguing in Quantz’ Versuch einer Anweisung die Flote traversiere zu spielen, I could not imagine how to incorporate his syllables, such as “did’ll,” into my own playing. Again, the difference between baroque and modern flute is that the aesthetic of the latter promotes uniformity of tonguing. When double-tonguing on modern flute, we should not be able to distinguish $d$ from $g$ or $l$ from $k$. On baroque flute, however, tonguing syllables emphasize the contours of a melody and bring out the changes in pattern of step-wise motion and leaps. Tonguing syllables rather than slurring show the shape of the phrase. Treatises by Hotteterre, Quantz, and Tromlitz provide excellent descriptions and examples of tonguing patterns (see the bibliography at the end of this article). The following are a few examples of baroque style articulation patterns.

**Example 1:** Tonguing for Step-wise Motion
(a) Starting on the Beat, (b) Starting on the Upbeat

Notice how the alternation of $t$ and $r$ (pronounced $tu$ and $ru$ toward the front of the tongue, the $ru$ like an Italian rolled “r”) create an alternate strong-weak pulse. The $tu$ is the shorter, sharper articulation, the $ru$ is longer, heavier, and duller.

**Example 2:** Tonguing for Leaping Motion

Notice that leaps require a sharper $tu$ articulation, but that when followed by step-wise motion the $ru$, $tu$, $ru$, $lu$, $ru$, $tu$ alternation occurs.

**Exercise 3:** Sixteenth-note Passages: “did’ll” and “di ti”

Notice $di ti$ provides a sharper articulation on repeated notes, while $did’ll$ creates a soft, slur-like quality in the sixteenth-note passages.
RHYTHMIC INEQUALITY: IT'S NOT WHAT'S ON THE PAGE

As young flutists we were taught to read rhythms accurately and to always do our best to honor the composer's intentions. Baroque rhythm is a little like jazz in that it is not always played exactly as notated. This can be disconcerting initially, but modern players will find that interpreting the written rhythms freely can also be an exhilarating experience. The practice of rhythmic inequality, or notes inégales in the French, is directly related to the tonguing patterns illustrated above. Once one practices the alternating *ri* and *tu* it becomes apparent that *ri* sounds slightly longer than *tu*. The amount of inequality can be lengthened or shortened to suit the meter, tempo indication, and character of a particular movement. A French overture can be played with over-dotted long notes and lightning-quick eighth notes. The scalar eighth-note passages of an allemande might be played with barely perceptible inequality. It is easiest to begin practicing this technique with scales written in equal quarter or eighth notes but played unequally.

THE COMPOSITION AS A SKELETON

Baroque music allows the performer a great deal of freedom. Original scores or facsimiles rarely indicate much in the way of articulation, phrasing, or dynamics. Interpretation is largely left to the performer. Rhythm, as shown above, can be interpreted somewhat freely. Ornamentation, an essential part of baroque performance, was a skill eighteenth-century musicians learned: to improvise while playing. Such an ability requires a solid knowledge of appropriate ornaments and thorough-bass harmony. For modern players learning how to ornament, the best source is the scores themselves. Theme and variation forms, such as chaconnes, provide ample ideas for rhythmic and melodic variation. Arias from operas and oratorio scores sometimes contain ornaments and cadenzas for the da capo sections. Baroque composers often borrowed melodies from each other or their own work and in so doing made variations. Treatises also provide excellent sources of ornamentation, and eighteenth-century essays and histories provide critiques on individual performances (see bibliography). Quantz advocated simplicity and recommended that performers acquire a knowledge of thorough-bass to prepare and resolve each dissonance according to the rules of composition:

Some persons believe that they will appear learned if they crowd an Adagio with many graces, and twist them around in such fashion that all too often hardly one note among ten harmonizes with the bass, and little of the principal air can be perceived. Yet in this they err greatly, and show their lack of true feeling for good taste.
Antonio Lorenzoni's flute treatise *Saggio per ben suonare il flauto traverso* (Vicenza, 1779) is essentially a paraphrase of Quantz's work. He recommends adding certain ornaments based on the prevailing sentiment of the piece. "Trills excite liveliness, appoggiaturas softness. This is a fact proven by experience. Therefore, one should not add trills too frequently in a sad piece and should not add too many appoggiaturas in a happy piece." One could find hundreds of quotations concerning ornamentation and expression, but it is more useful to put some of these ideas to practice. I encourage flutists to read the treatises and histories for further discoveries.

**ORNAMENTS CAN INTRODUCE DISSONANCE**

An ornament frequently consists of an introduced dissonance and its resolution against the bass line. Ornaments heighten the sense of tension and repose within a musical phrase and enhance the character of a movement. Improvised ornaments give a sense of immediacy and drama to the performance. How can we achieve that effect as novices of baroque style? First, believe in your ability to create brilliant ornaments. Second, become familiar with the harmonic progression of the movement you plan to embellish. It is helpful at first to write out your ideas on manuscript paper, putting melody and bass notes on two staves and leaving a third staff above for ornaments. In this way you will recognize the harmonic progressions and points of dissonance between melody and bass, as Quantz advises. By writing out ornaments you will discover interesting ideas that you might not have thought of were you to play alone. Play through your ornamented version while someone plays the bass line so that you can hear how the added dissonances work with the harmony. Then you can modify. As you become more accustomed to ornamenting, you will not need to write out embellishments as frequently or thoroughly. For additional ideas, listen to recordings of baroque flutists and recorder players.

![Musical Examples]

*Example 4: Handel, Adagio from the Sonata in G Major, op. 1, no. 5: mm. 11-16*
This adagio (previous page) from the Sonata in G Major, op. 1, no. 5 by George Frederick Handel is decorated with ornamentation by the present author on the top line. The original melody is on the bottom line for comparison. Appoggiaturas, passing tones, trills, mordents, triplets, and harmonic “outlines” are all included here. Notice also that the repetitions found in the original melody (mm. 11-12) can be ornamented in entirely different ways.

With some rethinking and putting aside of old habits, the modern flutist can readily adopt baroque flute technique and style. By listening to baroque flutists and practicing the exercises above, the novice will feel comfortable improvising ornaments and playing in baroque style in no time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


**ENDNOTES**

1 An early description of *messa di voce* appears in Giulio Caccini’s *Le nuove musiche* (1601/2) as “il crescere e scenare della voce.”


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

ANITA MILLER RIEDER performs on modern and historical flutes. She is the flutist of the Kithara Trio, which recorded two CDs in 1997: *Kithara Wonderland* and *Beau Soir*. She plays baroque and renaissance flutes with the Chicago Baroque Ensemble and is featured on *A Vivaldi Concert* (Cedille Records). She has played substitute with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and played Principal Flute at the Peninsula Music Festival in Door County. She is a winner of the first NFA Baroque Flute Artist Competition and a semifinalist of the Young Artist Competition. A Fulbright Scholar, she studied baroque flute in London and was a participant in the 1997 Aston Magna Academy. Anita holds a Doctor of Music degree from Northwestern University and is on the faculty of Wheaton College Conservatory in Wheaton, Illinois.