Finding Balance: Position
Posture and Presentation

by Angeleita S. Floyd

The idea of finding balance in one’s position, posture, and presentation was central to Geoffrey Gilbert’s no-nonsense approach. Gilbert’s teaching philosophy stressed the development of proper hand and body position, with controlled fingers and little body movement which allowed for further technical advancements to be made.

For making a change or correcting a bad habit, Gilbert offered these guidelines:

- During one’s practice, one should begin with the corrected concept. For example, if keeping the little finger of the left hand curved and close to the G-sharp key is desired then consciously curve and touch the finger to the key before beginning to play.
- It is natural and expected to revert after only a few seconds or minutes. After recognizing this phase, the next step is to correct the problem and begin again, playing correctly for a longer period of time.
- Repeating this process again and again helps to ensure gradual progress toward the proper goal and reduce some of the frustration.

Breaking a habit or changing one’s position can be a difficult process. Progress is assured by consistent and persistent application of these methods.

Geoffrey Gilbert stressed the development of proper fundamental technique and focused on adopting the most natural approach. Students often create problems for themselves by choosing a more difficult method. Gilbert based his methods and techniques on the simplest, easiest, and most functional positions for feeling comfortable and looking natural when playing the flute.

POSITION FOR HOLDING THE FLUTE

Many younger players “haven’t been taught the basic principles of where to put the flute on the mouth and how to hold the instrument in order to allow their fingers to move freely.”

“Follow these basic positions and theories which should make you look comfortable and natural—like you were born with the flute in your hands.”

Editor’s note: The quotations in italics are statements made by Geoffrey Gilbert during his master class sessions, interviews, and lessons.
LEFT HAND

The fingers of the left hand should be curved high over the keys (wrist curved under), so that a pencil would fit underneath the second joint (Figure 1). The fingers perform a lifting action and should never be flattened. Short fingernails are recommended.

The left thumb is not bent or crooked, but held straight when playing the thumb key(s) (Figure 2). It is easier to keep the thumb straight if it touches the flute slightly below the first joint.

The little finger of the left hand (for playing the G-sharp key) is curved and should not be raised much above the key. Hold the finger close to or touching the key (as if it were about to be used). (See Figure 1.) This finger should not drop below the G-sharp key.

RIGHT HAND

The fingers are curved over the keys and function like the left hand fingers—lifting from the joint, never flattening, and staying free from tension.

"Students quite often don’t balance the flute properly and then press so hard on the D-sharp key that the finger straightens or bows down and becomes cramped creating problems later on."

Use of the little finger of the right hand requires more specialized instructions for playing the “foot-joint notes.” The movement of the little finger should come from flexing, rotating, and extending from the joint, not from movement of the hand. When playing low E-flat (and middle E-flat0), the little finger remains curved on top of the key (Figure 3). When playing low C-sharp, the little finger remains curved and slides to the right onto the key. When playing low C or B, straighten the little finger when moving forward onto the key (from the low C-sharp key).

WRISTS

The left wrist is curved underneath the instrument for balance and support. (Remember to keep the left elbow up.) A slight pressure is directed toward the body from the left wrist. The right wrist and thumb lift the instru-
FINGER TECHNIQUE

Gilbert used the term “finger legato” when referring to the movement and placement of the fingers on the keys. According to the *Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Belknap Press, 1972), the term legato refers to playing “without any perceptible interruption between the notes.” By thinking legato with the fingers as well as with the music, Gilbert felt that the concept of playing smoothly and evenly without gaps and breaks between notes was more easily understood. He suggested the following:

1. Keep the fingers close to the keys and at equal heights. Lift slightly, but only enough to take the weight off the key, and the spring will cause the key to rise. Concentrate on a smooth and relaxed finger technique—a legato placement of the fingers from note to note.

2. When placing the fingers on the keys, do not smack, slap, or pop them. (Exception is allowed for notation of key slaps and pops in contemporary music.) Often the noise produced by popping the key is louder than the note being played. This serves no purpose and is detrimental when making recordings. The fingers should always be placed pianissimo, regardless of the dynamic level being played.

3. Keep the fingers arched over the keys, with the action coming down from the knuckle joint on top of the keys.

POSITION OF THE BODY

After learning how to balance and hold the instrument and to manage the fingers, the next step is to learn to sit or stand properly with the flute when playing. The following guidelines stress a natural, tension-free body placement and standing position, allowing for ease of breathing and blowing.

1. “Stand away from the copy.” This means to stand several feet away from the music stand, at least a flute’s length away from the music, to avoid “leaning with your elbow on the stand any minute.”

2. The nose should be aligned with the center of the music, with the flute and the stand in a parallel line. The feet should be placed about twelve inches apart, with the left foot forward and the right foot back. The player’s weight
should rest on the right foot. Remember that the flute is parallel to the stand, and the player's body should be turned to the right, allowing the shoulders and hips to create a 45 to 60 degree angle with the stand. The shoulders and feet should also be in line. (See Figure 4.)

3. Flutists should stand straight, without leaning forward. Leaning forward may hinder breath control as a result of either dropping the rib cage or pressing on the diaphragm. One of Gilbert's favorite demonstrations was to have a student stand straight, with back and heels against the wall. The shoulders and upper body remain against the wall as the right arm pushes the flute away from the wall and parallel to the stand. In addition, Gilbert often stated the following concerns in regard to body position:

"Pushing the flute forward (away from the body) will often free the sound," and "Pulling the right arm back toward your shoulder is very crippling."

4. Flutists should keep their heels on the floor.
5. The elbows should be lifted and held away from the body.
6. The head should be held up and tilted slightly to the right, exactly perpendicular to the line of the flute. (See Figure 5.)
7. The head and neck should be in line with the body, taking care not to create tension by sticking the neck forward. Some resulting neck problems have been documented as an occupational problem for flutists.
8. The right shoulder should be kept down, because tension is created when it is lifted. The right shoulder should be lower than the left, in line with the natural slope of the flute and the head.
9. The head should be held up. The eyes should be trained to look down while the head stays lifted. Lowering one's head affects the embouchure, causing problems such as tension or tightness, the embouchure hole being rolled in too far on the lip (covering too much), or the flute rising too high on the lower lip.

**BODY MOVEMENT**

"Any superfluous and violent movements may well be reflected inappropriately in the sound. The emotional needs of the music must be represented solely by the sound and not emphasized by unnecessary movements of the body. You might as well not play and just do the movements; then you'll have a 'ballet.'"

One of Gilbert's "pet peeves" was excessive body movement, which he felt became nothing more than ineffective musical choreography in an effort to produce crescendos, diminuendos, contrasting dynamics, or the climax of a phrase. Ask yourself if these musical nuances are coming out in the sound or if they are only being visually represented by one's body movements. When playing music, the sound, not the body movement, must be able to pinpoint the nuance in every phrase.

"If the success of the performance is to depend upon the amount of visual
underlining of the musical content, what happens if you make a recording? All of these important nuances will be missed. If this is true, the student should acquire a video recorder.”

One of the problems with excessive body movement is that it often adds importance to notes where it is not necessary. Gilbert described these movements as “subconscious behaviors caused by not being sure of your ability to communicate expression in the sound.” Natural movement from side to side is acceptable, but it must not be associated with certain peaks of the phrase. On the other hand, flutists should avoid looking casual, with one hip slung to the side, or rigid and stiff—“as if a taxidermist got bold of you.”

Conducting or beating time while playing is another undesirable characteristic. The metric movement may spoil the legato of the line as one becomes preoccupied with the conducting element and the movement, while the music becomes secondary. Dipping and ducking should be avoided, as they also interfere with the phrasing and the line. Additional choreographed movements to avoid include deep knee-bends, which show anxiety; weaving and sweeping; and rocking on tiptoes. Make an effort to become aware of and correct these mannerisms by looking into a mirror while practicing.

Gilbert agreed with Theobald Boehm’s statement in his book, The Flute and Flute-Playing (Dover Publications, 1963, p. 142), “If one cannot express his feelings through the style of tone, he surely is not in a position to do so by head or body movements.”

PRESENTATION

“Walk on full of confidence and pride. It is assumed that you are there because you want to be and that you have something to communicate.”

The many hours spent in a practice room perfecting scales, technical exercises, and pieces may not always prepare one for the proper performance attitude and posture. Gilbert suggested observing the following points on stage presence and presentation when preparing for performance:

1. Flutists should present themselves in a positive manner by standing back from the music, with head held high, elbows up, and a smile on their face. “You are playing the piece very well, now you have to perform it well.”

2. Do not place the stand directly in front of the performer for this creates a barrier between the performer and the audience. Place the stand to the side, toward the pianist, if playing a sonata. The stand should be low enough for the audience to see the performer—about the middle of the chest.

3. Remember the position and angle of the body in relationship to the stand—turning approximately 30 to 45 degrees to the right. Place an imaginary line on the floor and keep the feet and shoulders in line with this to ensure the proper angle.

4. The flute should be tuned before the performance and the pitch checked quietly once on stage.

5. Flutists should never “apologize” while playing by making facial, hand, or body gestures. The audience should be left to judge the performance without a flutist’s self-imposed doubt. Frowning should also be avoided because this is likely to cause the throat to tighten. “It is the spirit of the music that counts. So what if you play some wrong notes. The music is more important.”

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6. Gilbert often used the expression “Gaze fearlessly ahead.” When struggling with a piece, the audience suffers with you. No one wants to hear a “suffering performance.”

7. Many performances reach the audience as being too confidential or introverted in manner. Flutists should project themselves to the audience. There is a relationship between performance and public speaking; one communicates with words, the other with music. The audience must feel as if they have contact with the performer, so look up from the music when possible. Try to involve the audience in the performance.

8. The first thing the audience wants to hear is a beautiful sound, so start expressively. “If you don’t play a good first note, the audience is prejudiced against you. They do not give you credit for what you are trying to do. If you over-finesse so much that the note doesn’t come out, the audience is not very understanding.”

9. When bowing, do so slowly, keeping the feet together and head down. Remember to acknowledge the accompanist, especially when playing sonatas.

Gilbert advised his students that it would be difficult to experience a perfect performance. Keep in mind that the “batting average” for a good recital performance is about eighty-five percent. We create certain expectations for ourselves that can be difficult to fulfill. This can create frustration if we are never pleased with our performance. Performance should be kept in proper perspective, remembering that the first duty is to the music. Flutists must forget themselves, take pleasure in playing, and remember that “nobody ever completely lives up to their own expectations of themselves.”

A FINAL WORD

Geoffrey Gilbert’s approach to teaching was based on first securing the proper fundamentals and techniques through daily exercises and then applying them to the music. His ability to instill tremendous confidence in his students was equaled by his unending patience, persistence, and unquestionable knowledge. His teaching was thorough and stringent, demanding the proper and most effective results in execution. Yet, at the same time his approach was positive; any criticism offered was followed with solutions and practice methods for solving the problem.

A final word from Geoffrey Gilbert for successful practice was “Do not wait for changes to happen, you must make them happen. There is no such thing as failure; one should always have success in practicing unless the problem is approached incorrectly.”

CREDITS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANGELETTA S. FLOYD, Professor of Flute at the University of Northern Iowa, holds a Bachelor of Music degree from Stetson University, where she studied with the eminent English flutist Geoffrey Gilbert. She received Master of Music, Master of Music Education, and Doctor of Music degrees from The Florida State University. In addition to Mr. Gilbert, her teachers include Jean-Pierre Rampal, William Bennett, Trevor Wye, Peter Lloyd, Irene Maddox, and Charles DeLaney.

Dr. Floyd has performed throughout the United States, Great Britain, Russia and South America and is Principal Flutist of the Waterloo/Cedar Falls Symphony. She performs with guitarist Stephen Robinson and with the Northwind Quintet in two recently released compact discs.

Dr. Floyd has served The National Flute Association as a member of the Board of Directors, Coordinator for the High School Competition, the Young Artist Competition, and General Competitions Coordinator and Program Chair for the 1995 Convention. She is a contributing author to Flute Talk, The Flutist Quarterly, and NACWPI Journal. Her book The Gilbert Legacy has received international acclaim. Most recently, she edited and published Trevor Wye’s book Marcel Moyse: An Extraordinary Man.

ABOUT GEOFFREY GILBERT

GEOFFREY GILBERT (1914-1989) settled in the United States in 1969 and quickly became recognized as a teacher, flutist, and musician of exceptional depth and skill. Prior to that time, Gilbert had been one of the most celebrated flutists in England. Upon his death, The London Times described Gilbert as “the most influential British flutist of the twentieth century.”

Mr. Gilbert’s accomplishments include appointments with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, BBC Symphony, and the Hallé Orchestra. He performed the English premieres of the flute concertos by Ibert, Nielsen, Jolivet, and Rivier. Equally important was his professional association with such great conductors as Sir Thomas Beecham, Sir Malcolm Sargent, and Sir Hamilton Harty.

Geoffrey Gilbert’s pedagogical career included appointments at Trinity College, the Guildhall School of Music, and the Royal Manchester College of Music. Among his students were Trevor Wye, Susan Milan, Alexander Murray, William Bennett, and James Galway. Gilbert was the initiating figure in the transition from wooden to silver flute, which changed the English school of flute playing for years to come.