How do YOU Finger B-flat?

by Carol Kniebusch Noe

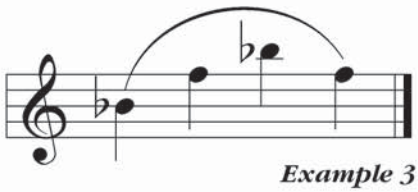
The B-flat on the flute is probably the most confusing fingering on the instrument. Clarinet, oboe, saxophone and bassoon players at early stages of learning their instrument become competent and adept at mastering the side keys, thumb keys and alternate little finger keys to facilitate their technique. Young flutists on the other hand never seem secure or confident about the B-flat fingerings and as a result use only one fingering in all situations. B-flat is the only note on the flute that regularly utilizes more than one fingering.

There are three fingerings for B-flat and fast and complicated fingering passages can be greatly facilitated if a few simple rules are taught to the young player and reinforced by musical examples. The easiest rule to remember when determining a B-flat fingering on the flute is the following: *Use the fingering combination that moves the least number of fingers and/or keys.*

Example 1

The fingering most commonly taught to beginning flutists for B-flat is the first finger on each hand along with the B-natural or the "long" thumb key (Example 1). This fingering is the most successful for the young player since the instrument is held more securely. Holding one finger down on each hand allows the instrument to balance properly and gives the younger player with small hands more confidence in holding the instrument. This fingering for B-flat is probably considered the most popular. Referring back to the fingering rule stated above, this fingering would be used in the finger combinations where the B-flat was followed by a note requiring more fingers to be depressed on the right hand (Example 2). It would also be commonly used in the key of B-flat where there would naturally be many notes from the dominant to the tonic, i.e. F to B-flat thus requiring only the moving of two left hand fingers (Example 3).

Example 2



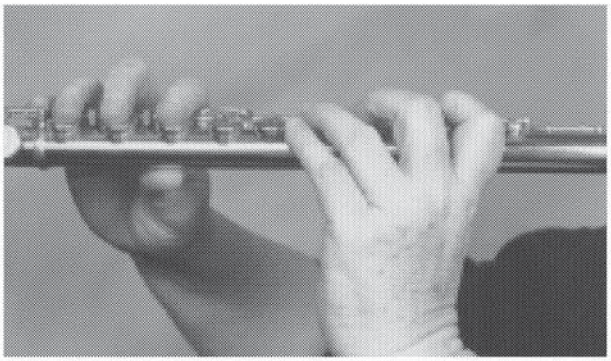
Example 3

The first finger of the right hand or the F key closes 3 keys on the flute. This fingering would not be recommended in the combination of A to B-flat since only two fingers are required for A—the second finger would be released while the first finger right hand would add three keys. This fingering requires a great deal of coordination of fingers and since it requires so many keys to be depressed, is not the clearest and best in tune of the three basic B-flat fingerings. The best fingering for A to B-flat in this situation would be the thumb B-flat key or the side key depending on the key signature.

Example 4

The next fingering to consider is the B-flat thumb fingering which was invented by Giulio Briccialdi in 1849 approximately two years after Theobald Boehm completed his fingering system. Placing the thumb on the round left thumb key depresses the B-flat key (the first large key on the top of the flute) as well as the thumb key (Example 4). This means the only finger depressed on the right hand is the little finger. Some young players find this fingering awkward at first and are hesitant to use it for fear of dropping the flute. With encouragement of proper hand position, this problem can be solved and overcome (Example 5 shows a well balanced and correct hand position).

The "thumb B-flat" fingering, as it is commonly called, is very useful while playing in the flat keys since it may remain depressed while fingering all of the other notes except, of course, C-natural and D-flat. The only two notes where the B-flat thumb key cannot be used are B-natural and third octave F-sharp or G-flat. There is no need to slide over to the "long" thumb key for fingering other notes. In fact, sliding the thumb key is considered incorrect usage since it tends to disturb the entire holding position of the flute and executing the slide will most likely cause an unwanted accent in the musical line. This sliding cannot be accomplished smoothly and accurately in most cases so it is not recommended.



Example 5

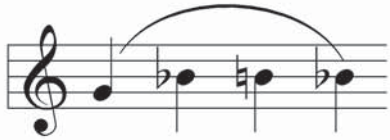
In playing music that has the occasional B-natural or high F-sharp (G-flat) a player may keep the B-flat thumb key depressed on all of the other notes and move to the "long" or B-natural thumb key following a C, a D-flat or any note that doesn't require either thumb key to be depressed (Example 6). The player can then move back to the B-flat thumb key following the next note in the music that does not require the thumb to be used. Students should be encouraged to study and mark their music when the thumb is to be changed. A plus (+) sign can be used for the B-flat thumb key while an "O" can be used to take it off (Example 6). If the music is studied and marked properly, a player will never be caught in a situation of having to slide the thumb. Many students learn to slide the thumb with some ease but most flute teachers frown on this since they are convinced that students' technique would be much smoother and faster if the above studied method would be utilized.

Example 6

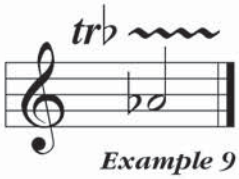
Example 7

The most neglected B-flat fingering is the "side key" depressed by the first finger of the right hand. Example 7 shows the side key next to the first finger right hand. The side key is used along with the regular B-natural fingering and it depresses only the B-flat key (the first large key on the flute). Therefore, it is considered to be a little clearer in

sound and better in tune. In addition to providing an alternative to the B-flat to B-natural trill, it facilitates passages with sequences of B-flat, B-natural, B-flat because the side key, unlike either the F (first finger right hand) key, or the B-flat thumb key can be held down while fingering G which insures a smooth transition from G to B-flat (Example 8). It can also be used for A flat to B-flat trills (Example 9). Because we can hold down the side key while fingering A, this fingering is encouraged for all chromatic passages (Example 10). To move from A to B-flat, merely lift the second key if the side key is depressed. This is certainly superior to adding the first finger right hand which depresses three keys or sliding the thumb which is technically awkward. Referring back to the fingering rules stated at the beginning, the side key certainly moves the least number of keys in this fingering option.

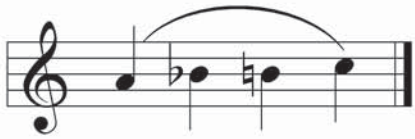


Example 8



Example 9

Flute students are urged to incorporate all three fingerings for B-flat into their playing routine and to use them to advantage for fingering facility and pitch clarity. We should be grateful not to have to learn as many alternate fingerings as our fellow woodwind players.



Example 10

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CAROL KNIEBUSCH NOE is a Professor of Music at James Madison University where she received the JMU Distinguished Teaching Award. She has performed and conducted in many states as well as several times in England, Canada, Venezuela, the Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China. She is formerly a member of the Vancouver Symphony, the Baltimore Symphony and the Roanoke Symphony. She has written several articles for *Flute Talk*, *The Instrumentalist*, *Pan*, and *Flutewise*. (The latter two are English publications.) In 1996 she completed her book, *A Guidebook to Flute Choir Literature* published by Kendall-Hunt Publishing Company. Her other interests include breeding and showing dogs as well as serving as a licensed judge for the American Kennel Club.