

The Alto Flute in G and the Bass Flute in C: The Flutist's Approach to Playing These Instruments

by Sarah Baird Fouse

My first experience playing the alto flute was a new adventure in sound and timbre for me. Later I was fortunate to be able to have the same experience with bass flute. The depth and vibrations of the lower notes seemed exotic to me. I loved the sound of the low dark octave. After playing these instruments, especially in ensembles, I was “hooked” and “spoiled” forever.

The transition to playing the alto flute in G and the bass flute in C is not as difficult as one might expect. The basic flute technique is easily transferred, the basic fingerings are the same, transposition of the music is already done, and all of the notes are printed in treble clef! The transposition of the alto flute is four tones lower than written, while the bass flute sounds one octave lower than written.

There are several physical adaptations that must be made when approaching and playing the alto and bass flutes. The instruments have a larger bore and are longer in length. Both flutes are relatively heavier and both take more space. The first step in adapting to a new low register is to approach these instruments starting with the left hand notes from B¹ and descending one note at a time, extending the range gradually. A looser embouchure is necessary for both flutes, especially the bass flute.

Bass flutes are constructed and balanced with a curved headjoint, so stretching the arms beyond a natural position is usually not a problem. The fingers can be placed in a fairly comfortable position because of the placement of the smaller “button size” extension keys. These small extension keys are attached to each of the main large keys as needed and fit most hands and fingers without any difficulty. A crutch is included with most bass flutes which fits between the left hand thumb and index finger. This helps to balance the bass flute, making it much more secure. The right hand is more problematic because the thumb must take more than its share of the weight and right hand cramping can be a problem.

Alto flutes are available with a curved headjoint or the standard straight headjoint. The curved headjoint has a definite advantage for people who have short to average arm lengths. It is much better for most flutists, in that it is much more comfortable to balance and hold, especially for the right arm and wrist. The small extension keys are also included for both hands.

Where to position the curved headjoint of both the alto and bass flutes must be decided by each individual person. The mouthpiece may be placed with the embouchure hole parallel and above the body of the flute, or in a circular position on the same level as the body. This will depend on balance

considerations and sound or vibrations that the performer prefers. The curved headjoint does not affect the tone or the pitch of the flute. A curved headjoint and a straight headjoint should sound identical, as long as their overall length is the same.

The output and volume of air required in playing the alto and bass is relative to the dynamic level, the intensity of the tone, and the particular range. All things being relative, the alto and bass flutes with larger bore and longer length take more air and breath support. Both instruments require much more embouchure flexibility in playing contrasting dynamics, tone intensity, and ascending/descending wide intervals.

Tuning requires much flexibility and sensitivity. In playing the alto and bass flutes, embouchure flexibility is much more exaggerated. The lips (jaw) forward position is much more extreme for the high notes and for soft dynamics. Also the lips (jaw) back position for low notes and forte dynamics is more exaggerated. The bass flute pitch in the third octave varies from very sharp to flat. The alto flute is extremely sharp on the majority of notes in the third octave. Some pitch solutions for both flutes are: 1) check the headjoint tuning cork position, with the cleaning rod tuning mark supplied by the manufacturer, 2) always use a pitch tuner to check notes when uncertain about the pitch level, 3) tune all of the octaves from the lowest to the second and third octaves, and 4) realize that the pitch level tends to change with varying atmospheric conditions and individual physical ups and downs.

Pitch idiosyncrasies of the alto and bass flutes may vary somewhat from one flute to another. I find that my alto flute pitched at A-442, with the mouthpiece pushed in all the way, must be pulled out for A-440 from one-half to five-eighths of an inch. The curved headjoint must be tuned with the mouthpiece pulled at the barrel (the same as the straight head) nearest to the flute body. The bass flute mouthpiece usually must be pulled out from the joint nearest to the blow hole, approximately one-quarter of an inch, to play at A-440.

When playing alto and bass flute notes that extend into the third octave, check all of the high notes for the pitch tendency. Mark the notes that need adjusting by using adjustment arrows, arrow down to lower pitch and arrow up to raise pitch. These reminders are always helpful! Adjusting pitch on individual notes can be done by changing your head/lip angle in the direction of the arrows; slightly up to sharpen or angle down to flatten. This useful "fine tuning" is an excellent way to make needed adjustments very quickly while playing, especially for third octave notes and forte passages. This technique is not meant to be a substitute for basic tuning already mentioned.

Bass flute notes in the lower middle octave from F-sharp² to E² tend to lack clarity and focus when articulated. These notes, F-sharp², F², and E² have this tendency because often there is a delayed response and overtones will speak either from the lower or higher octave. A possible solution is learning the technique of using the "flick" keys, which help to set the beginning of the note. The "flick" keys are the two trill keys set between the F and D keys. Bassoonists use the left hand thumb "flick" key combinations for this very same reason, to make the notes respond in the upper second octave.

Combinations of the bass flute second octave "flick" keys must be coordinated with the breath, fingers and tongue. These are: 1) E², "flick" 1st trill key, 2) F², "flick" 2nd trill key, 3) F-sharp², "flick" 1st trill key. To "flick" the trill key, one must quickly, lightly brush the key in a forward motion coordinating the finger with the articulation. Another technique to clarify articulation on these notes is to open the first finger C key, closing it quickly when articulating. When slurring in

this octave, let the embouchure and breath keep the air stream focused and smooth to avoid overtones or subtones. This technique can also be used with the alto flute as needed.

The third octave of the bass flute has many varying tendencies in pitch. What I have found is: 1) generally the C-sharp/ D-flat has a flat tendency, 2) the E is very sharp, and 3) the F-sharp is also very sharp. To correct these tendencies, try the fingerings shown here:

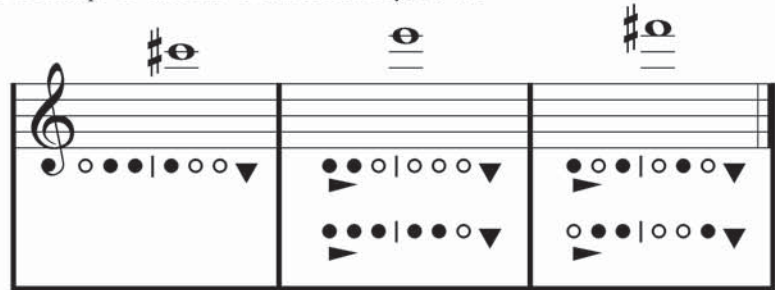
Don't be afraid to experiment to find your own solutions and alternative fingerings. Remember that harmonic fingerings can help adjust pitch in the third octave, and the C (first finger) key and trill keys can

act as octave keys to help clarify articulation at the beginning of phrases for the second octave notes F-sharp, F, and E. Another suggestion for these second octave notes might be, to use the "French" forward tonguing concept, where the tongue is placed in the back of the upper lip with the air released from that position. Note that the tongue should not be seen or go outward between or beyond the lips. Try using the regular fingerings with this technique, then experiment with the "octave" keys mentioned above.

Tonguing is another important adaptation for the lower instruments. In staccato tonguing, the breath must be released by the tongue very quickly and with good abdominal breath support. When playing in a legato style, the release of the air must be anticipated but approached more gently. Breath support must be constant and full. Deep breaths are not only essential but healthy! Staccato notes in the lower octave tend to respond more slowly and are generally sluggish. To correct this, try to anticipate these notes with the breath and tongue, especially staccato notes that need to be played in a pizzicato style. Always make these notes as quick and vibrant as possible, especially when playing fast accompanying passages. To make the response clearer, tap the G key very quickly for notes from F-sharp¹ to C¹, while tonguing and fingering the note to be played.

Many solos and studies from the flute repertoire are adaptable to the alto and bass flutes. Solo repertoire from the Baroque period is very effective. Also, music written from the Classical period to the present is adaptable, especially slow movements. Études and scale studies are a must. Each flutist must decide on his/her choice of studies in practicing technique and tone. Original solos written for the alto and bass flutes can be found in flute catalogs. The list is small, but a growing interest in these flutes continues to stimulate more composers to write for them.

Since I have been playing all of the flutes in the flute family since the late 1950's, I can tell you that they have made me very pliable with regard to embouchure, breathing, and the basic techniques. I believe that by acquainting oneself with the extended range, timbre, and colors of the alto and bass flutes, one's technique on the C flute will become much more flexible and enjoyable. Go for it and enjoy!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SARAH BAIRD FOUSE is Professor of Music at the University of Florida where she teaches Flute Performance, Woodwind Literature, Woodwind Pedagogy, and Woodwind Skills. She performs with the Florida Wind Quintet, Flutes Fantastico, and the Gainesville Symphony Orchestra. A member of The National Flute Association since the first convention in 1973, she served on the Board of Directors (1974-76), then as Program Chair (1975) and Secretary/Treasurer (1984). She participated in NFA exchanges to the Soviet Union and Eastern Germany, and performed with the American Flute Orchestra in Ireland, France and Austria. She is a founding member of the Florida Flute Club at Gainesville and the Florida Flute Association.

A graduate of the University of Michigan (B. Mus) and the University of Kentucky (M. Mus), her principal teachers have been Nelson Hauenstein, John Kiburtz, Alfred Fenboque, and Robert Cavally. Her CD *Music 4 Flutes by 20th Century Composers* includes compositions for piccolo, C flute, alto flute, and bass flute.