

From Tension to Freedom: Rediscovering the Purpose of Flute Warm-Ups

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Overview

This workshop introduces a set of traditional flute warm-ups, reimagined to reduce physical tension and promote more efficient playing. As flutists, we often develop habits that rely on muscular tension to produce tone or execute technique—especially when dealing with posture and repetitive movements over long hours of playing. Unfortunately, this tension can lead to fatigue, injury, and stagnation in tone production.

By refocusing warm-up routines to prioritize relaxation and engage the body's larger, more sustainable muscle groups, we can foster a freer, more resonant sound and improve endurance. This approach not only enhances tone and technique but also promotes a healthier, more sustainable playing practice.

Guiding Principles

- **Tension-free playing is more efficient playing.**
Eliminating unnecessary tension allows for greater ease, control, and endurance.
- **Warm-ups are for preparing the body—not perfecting the sound.**
Focus on setting up healthy mechanics; a "perfect" tone will follow as a result of good setup.
- **Awareness is the first step to releasing tension.**
You can't let go of what you don't notice—develop body awareness to make meaningful changes.
- **Engage larger muscles to support the smaller ones.**
Think of the body working like a whip: power and motion originate from the larger muscle groups.
- **Slow practice comes first—and stays slow until it's tension-free.**
Speed should never be built on strain. Only increase tempo when ease and balance are maintained.
- **Real change takes time.**
Building new habits is a gradual process. Be patient, consistent, and kind to yourself.

1. Stretches

Problem: General body tension

Activity: Gentle stretches targeting the neck, shoulders, arms, hands, torso, and hips

Goal: Release overall tension and improve posture for playing comfort

2. Breathing without Tension – Timed Breathing

Problem: Breath is often overlooked, inefficient, or produces tension in parts of the body

Activity: Continuous cyclical breathing through the mouth, filling the entire torso without pause

Cycles of breathing, 4x each: 4 in/4 out; 3/3; 2/2; 1/1

No stopping; the air is always moving

Move all air in each cycle

Goal: Relax and stretch torso muscles, develop tension-free breathing, and increase breath capacity

3. Tension-free Embouchure – modified *Moyse de la Sonorite*

Problem: Early focus on perfect tone can create restrictive lip tension

Activity: Using the half-step pattern from *de la Sonorité*, produce tone through four repeated “huffs” (no articulation), supported by free-moving air

Don’t worry if the note doesn’t come out, or is not clear! It’ll happen eventually.

Goal: Release embouchure tension, enhance open air support, and discover a relaxed approach to pitch focus





5. Tension-free Articulation – modified Moyse Daily Exercises

Problem: Articulation without tension awareness leads to heavy, fatigued tonguing that impairs tone

Activity: Using full-range scales from Moyse *Daily Exercises A*, cycle through articulation patterns (Ha, Ta, Ka, T-K, K-T, TKT, KTK) with minimal tension

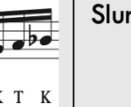
Tip: start the cycle on a different scale each day

Goal: Strengthen torso/airstream support to allow for relaxed lips and tongue, and clear articulation

Connections: use the “huff” approach from #3 on the single tonguing patterns; use the “slow practice” principle to relax your fingers, especially in the slurred scales

Sample: full range scales



1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Slur	Ha	Ta	Ka	Slur	 T K T K	 K T K T	 T K T K	Slur	 T T K T T K	 T K T T K T	 T K T T K T

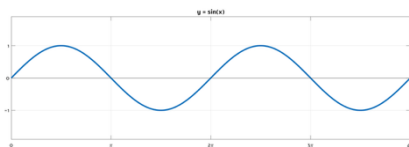
6. Tension-free Vibrato – Measured Vibrato

Problem: Vibrato driven by small muscles in the throat or lips creates tension and limits support

Activity: Practice whole-tone scales with vibrato that gradually increases in subdivisions per beat (mm=60). Create slow, smooth waves by varying airtspeed with minimal embouchure tension.

Goal: Develop vibrato fully supported by lower torso muscles, free from throat and lip strain

Inspiration: the smooth, even sine wave¹:

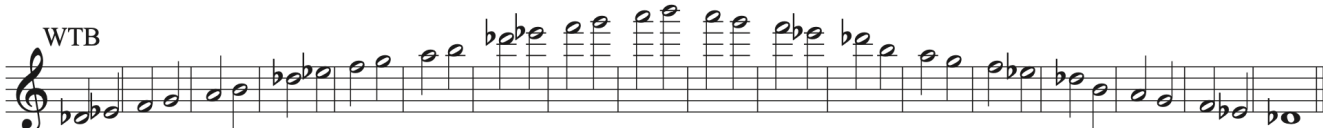


Full range whole tone scales:

WTA

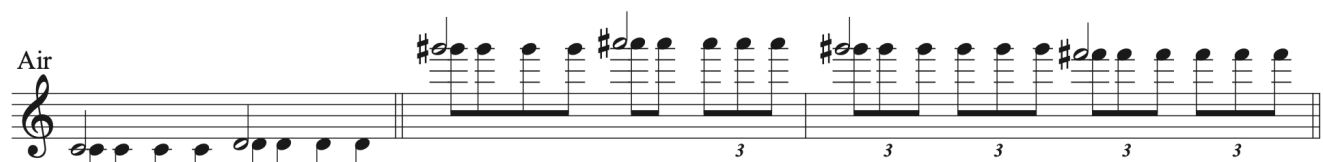


WTB

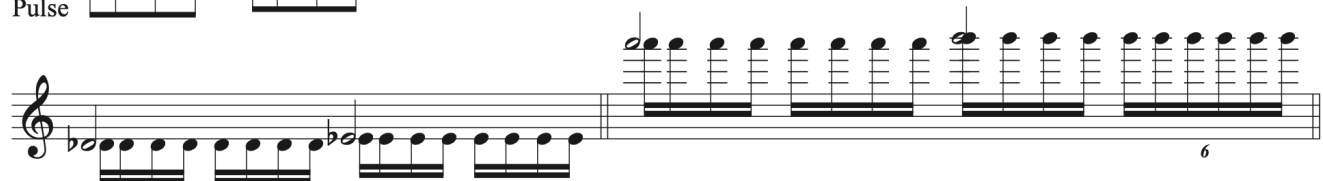


Vibrato pattern:

Air



Pulse



¹ Image source: Michal Zalewski, "Why are sine waves so common?" *lcamtuf's thing* (blog), March 10, 2025, accessed April 13, 2026, <https://lcamtuf.substack.com/p/why-are-sine-waves-so-common>.