

Flute Ensemble Gathering of the GPFS, January 2023

Exercises for Before, During and After Playing the Flute

The following are exercises we will go through together at the start of our event. You do **NOT** have to read them ahead of time (but you are welcome to if you want.)

You do **NOT** need to print them and bring them, at all.

They are here for your use if you want to keep doing them on your own.

Please know this:

All the movements and action are to be done really gently and smoothly. Any stretch is to be mild, i.e. at the first edge of the stretch. Sometimes with breathing and being in a pose the muscles with “give” and you find you can come a little further into a new first edge of stretch.

If anything doesn't feel right for you, back off, or just skip it that particular activity. You can simply imagine doing it or just take a break.

Some of this ideas and actions will be very subtle, just a thought really. But such thoughts, or “image of the action,” can be quite effective.

So, play with doing less, not more. Enjoy subtle effects, which can be really enriching.

Alternate Nostril Breathing

a yoga technique

Bring your right hand to your nose. Press your thumb against the side of the right nostril, closing it. Breathe into the left nostril slowly and smoothly for four full counts (one-second counts basically). Then hold your breath for four full counts as you let go of the right nostril and place your fourth finger against the left nostril, closing it. Exhale through the right nostril smoothly and gently for six counts. Keep your hand as-is. Pause a moment and repeat: breathe in the same nostril, the right one, for four counts. Then hold breath for four counts while letting go of left nostril and placing thumb to close right nostril, then breathe out the left nostril for six counts. Then pause and breathe in the same, left, nostril and continue in this pattern for maybe another two to three times, or more.

You can play with variations. Count in six, hold six, out nine. Or four, four and eight. Or no counting, just approximating with the exhalation 1.5 to 2 times longer than the lengths of inhalation and breath holding.

Five-Pointed Star

adapted from my yoga experience

Stand with legs fairly wide apart, arms out to the side a little higher than horizontal, and knees unlocked. Breathe in easily, then breathe out sensing your pelvis as the center of gravity, imagine lines growing from pelvis through the leg bones and feet into the ground. Breathe in, then breathe out and imagine lines growing from the pelvis up through the shoulders, arms, hands and fingers. Breathe in easily, then breathe out imagining a line grows from the pelvis up through each vertebral body of the spine, into the head and out the top center of the head. Then, breathing, sense yourself as a five-pointed star extending outwards from the pelvis through each point: feet, hands and head. When ready, lower arms smoothly and bring feet closer together again.

Tongue and Jaw Resting Positions

a technique from various sources

Let your tongue move to nestle up into the roof, or dome, of your mouth. The front part of the tongue will lie on the lower flat surface in front of the dome, with the tip of the tongue just a little in back of the front teeth.

Find the resting place for the lower jaw, which is just a small distance from the upper jaw. (I.e., place your lower teeth against your upper teeth, then let your lower teeth drop away into that initial resting spot. The space between the upper and lower front teeth would be just enough for a finger nail to fit into.)

In these following yoga poses, let the tongue be in its resting position and the jaw relaxed. Think of the mouth as being spacious.

Standing Forward Bend Stretch

a yoga pose

Stand with feet hip width apart, knees unlocked. Raise arms overhead.

Breathing easily, roll the pelvis so the upper body comes down in front, spine relaxed. Come down as far as you can easily. Let the back of the neck be long so the head hangs down, and let the arms hang down with no effort.

Breathe in and breathe out a few times, letting your spine and ribs, shoulders and arms fully let go. Maybe turn your head right and left a very short comfortable distance to help the upper neck let go.

Place your hands on their opposite elbows and let the hands “invite” the back and spine and shoulders to melt into further lengthening.

Let go of your elbows and let the arms and hands rest fully down. Enjoy.

Then place the hands on your knees. Bend your knees a few degrees.

Press your feet into the ground and, keeping the spine fully relaxed, roll the pelvis to slowly bring yourself to standing, keeping the spine relaxed. Don't push the hands into the legs but let the hands lightly walk up the legs to help keep the action smooth and gentle.

Standing Spinal Rotation

a yoga pose

Stand with feet about hip width apart. Sense the length from pelvis through legs and pelvis through the spine and up through the top center of the head. Breathe in and out sensing the length of the abdomen from its center down into the pubic bone and from its center up into the base of the breastplate. Let this sensing bring the breastplate very gently forward and up so the shoulder blades settle down in back.

Have the left hand in a soft fist and place it behind the left hip where it is comfortable. Bring the right hand across the abdomen to the where the fingers rest on the front of the pelvis. Check that knees are unlocked.

Breathe in and breathe out easily with jaw relaxed, tongue resting in the roof of the mouth. Keep the pelvis distinctly facing forward and begin to turn the spine to the left, beginning at the very bottom of the spine and gradually working up through the neck and head. It may take two or three breathing cycles to complete this turning.

Stay in this twist. Breathe easily, expanding the ribs, breathe out and imagine lengthening from the pelvis up through each vertebra of the entire spine and out the top center of the head. Let the collar bones and shoulder blades rest on the ribs.

Slowly turn just the neck and head to the right. Keep the full left turn through the low spine and shoulders. Breathe in and out enjoying this double twist and your postural support. Smoothly turn the eyes to the left and to the right easily once or twice.

Then turn the head back fully to the left. Here gently turn the eyes left and right. Notice if the jaw echoes the left and right movement too.

Then slowly come out of this twist, starting with the head. As your shoulders turn back, let your arms come back and finish returning to neutral standing.

Do the same pose to this side.

Standing Arms Over Head Side Bends

a yoga pose

Stand with feet about hip width apart, knees unlocked. Bring arms up over head and interlace the fingers, palms down. Move the wrists away from each other to have the hands flat and fingers long.

Breathe in and breathe out, pressing feet into the ground and lengthening the arms upward, releasing upwards from below the shoulder blades. I.e. Play with a sense that you can lengthen from below the shoulder blades. There is not any lifting of the tops of the shoulders toward the neck, but instead the collarbones and shoulder blades stay rested on the ribs as the lengthening comes from the back of the pelvis up into the base of the shoulder blades.

After a few breaths with this stretch, bend the elbows, bringing the hands down a few inches to where it is easy to turn the hands over, then return to fully overhead, with the palms now facing upwards.

Breathe in shifting your weight to your right foot. Breathe out pressing the right foot into the ground and lengthen the right hand away from the right foot. You can think of it as lengthening the heel of the right hand away from the heel of the right foot.

Breathe in, letting the ribs expand and breathe out, stretching gently. Then breathe in and out, letting go of this lengthening and bring yourself to being even on both feet.

Do the same to the left.

When concluded with the left stretch come back to being even on both feet, let the hands separate and turn the arms to palms facing outwards, then lower arms down at the sides, reaching the arms outwards, like you are scraping the insides of a rainbow.

Standing Front of Shoulders Stretch with Hands in Back a yoga pose

Stand with feet hip width apart, knees unlocked. Put hands in back behind the pelvis in one of two ways:

1. Hands together, fingers interlaced. Move the wrists away from each other to let the hands be flat with fingers long. Palms face up.
2. Hands in back of your hips, each in a soft fist, thumbs on the outside, and palms facing out in back. Then turn the arms so the palms face each other. Your arms might move away from each a little when you do this. Holding a strap between the hands could enhance this positioning.

With either position, have the elbows be unlocked.

(Sometimes to bring your arms in back, to either position, it can be nice to round your back and roll your pelvis, tailbone downwards, a little. Then once the hands are in position smoothly bring yourself back to standing easily tall.)

Breathe in across the shoulders. Make sure the shoulders are settled on the ribs.

Breathe out, pressing the feet into the ground and imagine lengthening from the pelvis

down through the legs and feet and up through the spine and out the top center of the head.

It might help to think of your sacrum/tailbone as being long or heavy, which may give more support to your spine.

Breathe in smoothly and breathe out, moving the arms away from the pelvis. Go only as far as you can easily. Distance is not important, just a small lift away is good.

Breathe in across the front of the shoulders, breathe out letting the shoulders ease into this opening across the front.

Breathe in smoothly and breathe out, round with pelvis/spine and letting arms come back to the pelvis. Bring yourself back to easily tall, first pressing with the feet, and let the hands go down to your sides.

Forward Facing Warrior

a yoga pose

Stand, feet hip width apart, knees unlocked. Breathe in and breathe out, pressing feet into the ground and imagine being easily tall from pelvis down through legs and feet into the ground and from pelvis through spine and out through the top center of the head. Breathe in and out sensing the length of the abdomen from its center down into the pubic bone and from its center up into the base of the breastplate. Let this sensing bring the breastplate very gently forward and up so the shoulder blades settle down in back.

Bring the right foot forward. Have the knee over the foot so the foreleg is vertical. Make sure the left knee stays unlocked and any stretch feels very mild. Lift the arms out to the sides and up overhead, palms facing each other.

Breathe in smoothly and breathe out, pressing the left heel into the floor, rolling the pelvis slightly so the tailbone comes down and forward, and, the front of the hip opens a little for a front-of-hip mild stretch. Breathe in and breathe out reaching the arms upward by releasing from below the shoulder blades. Breathe in and breathe out looking toward the hands, lower jaw away from the upper jaw.

Breathe in and breathe out, turning arms palms out and lowering arms down to the side. Breathing, step forward with the left leg to come back to standing.

Do the same placing the right foot in back.

The Lion

a yoga pose

Stand, feet hip width apart, knees unlocked. Be easily tall with shoulders settled on the ribs. Hands on hips.

Also let the back of the right hand come against the palm of the left hand. Slide the right hand around to explore from underneath the contours of the left hand and fingers and thumb, again with no action in either hand. Notice your breathing, play with moving with the breath as you move right hand on the left hand.

At some point have left hand be moving on the right hand instead. Gradually, have the left and right hands both moving on each other. All movement is slow, thoughtful, with fingers and palms completely quiet. Breathing is in the background of your attention, sense ease or spaciousness in your jaw.

Move your hands away from each other and let them rest. Sense the shapes of the palms and fingers/thumb again, and sense if they feel different now.

As you live your life, experiment with using your fingers and hands in a quiet and easy manner, using the least amount of effort in the hands and fingers that is needed to achieve a task like unlocking a door, holding a steering wheel, lifting a glass, holding a pen, typing at the keyboard. Or, of course, playing your flute.

Using the Vertical Axis

Developed from yoga and Feldenkrais

As you play your flute, continue to pay attention to the feet on the ground. Think of the pelvis as the center of gravity, center of movement. Let the action of the upper body be supported by the legs and pelvis, and imagine the lengthening through your spine and out the top center of your head.

If you are sitting, let the feet rest on the ground with knees balanced over your feet. Pressing the feet into the ground doesn't seem to be useful. But, thinking of the pelvis as the center of action and keeping the sense of the legs and feet and ground gives helpful support to the upper body. In other words, let the sense of your entire self be dynamic or athletic when sitting playing the flute.

A way to find efficient sitting is to be at the front of the chair. Roll the pelvis back, rounding the spine and lowering the head. Then slowly roll the pelvis forward, bring the spine and head back up, stopping where you are easily tall.

In standing, the feet can press into the ground when it's wanted. Often just the image of lengthening from the pelvis through the leg bones and feet into the ground with do it. Then let your self be easily tall in the upper body.

In both sitting and standing, please don't feel confined to a strictly "easily tall" position. As you reach to turn a page, maybe let the spine turn. Perhaps let the spine arch forward as you adjust the light at the top of your music stand. Let the spine maybe

round as you reach down to pick up a piece of sheet music off the floor. Maybe use some side bending and weight shifting a little as you play.

What's very helpful to stay away from is a tendency to bring the head forward with rounding in the upper back. That's using your "horizontal axis" as I think of it. If you notice this happening in sitting, roll the pelvis forward a little, and bring yourself to easily tall again. In standing, press with your feet and come back to easily tall by growing up from the ground, from the pelvis.

Walking Smoothly

Developed from yoga and Feldenkrais

Five main things to think about: breathing, feet, pelvis, breast plate, and length through spine/head.

Feet: sense the rolling action of the feet across the floor as they "take the floor out in back" with each step, which propels you forward.

Pelvis: be interested in the pelvis leading, being center of movement.

Breast Plate: have the breast plate in an efficient forward and up position so the upper body is completely supported and resting on the pelvis and legs

Length through spine/head: Imagine the spine lengthening from the pelvis through top center of head.

Breathing: move with the breath.

And/or, simply, let your walking be elegant.

Taking the Sense of Yourself into the Rest of your Day a Feldenkrais concept

When you are done with yoga stretches or any other body work, or with your flute playing, allow yourself to stay with the sense of yourself, your bearing and movements, and what you have experienced or learned, as you move away to go into another activity in your life. In other words, play with not mentally dropping it all and going into a new task-oriented mode. Play instead, during your day, with sensing your self and how you move and act, using what you have learned to let movement and posture be more efficient and pleasurable, and, to let what you have learned about flute playing be settled more deeply into your brain's memory files.

Four Phases of Breathing From *Sounder Sleep*®, a system developed by a Feldenkrais Practitioner. This breathing practice probably has ancient roots.

Breathe in and breathe out, sensing these two phases of the breath.

Add a third phase, by pausing after the in-breath momentarily, and when it seems right, breathe out. Then breathe in again, repeating the pause before the out-breath.

Don't make yourself hold your breath, breathe out as soon as you sense a prompt to do so. The pause, then, is just a few seconds at most.

Now, also pause after the out-breath, staying settled there until you naturally want to breath in again. Do this four-phase breathing, very easily and unrushed, for a little bit.

Don't make yourself hold your breath, breathe in as soon as you sense a prompt to do so. The pause, then, is just a few seconds at most.

Gradually notice that at the end of the out-breath, when the breath is "empty," the mind is empty too. Let yourself rest in that emptiness during the pause.

Standing Palms Together

From yoga

Stand with feet hip width apart, knees unlocked. Have jaw relaxed with tongue resting into the roof of the mouth. Eyes soft.

Breathe in and out, pressing the feet into the floor, sensing the length from the pelvis through the leg bones and feet and into the ground. Breathe in and out and imagine lengthening from the pelvis through each vertebra of the spine and out the top center of the head. Breathe in and out, sensing yourself as easily tall from pelvis through legs and feet and pelvis through spine and head. The ribs move easily with the breath.

Bring in smoothly and breathe out bringing your hands to each other, palms and fingers flat against each other, in front of your breastplate. Breathe in and out, sensing the length of the abdomen down to the pubic bone and up to the base of the breastplate, imagining or letting the breastplate move forward and up to where the shoulder blades rest easily on the ribs in back.

Breathe in and out in this position, letting the placement of the hands be of honor and gratitude to yourself.

Then bring the hands to be in front of your forehead. Breathing, let this position of the hands be of honor and gratitude for your teachers.

Then bring the hands up overhead and breathe. Let this position of the hands be of honor and gratitude for who or what for you gives larger perspective and awe, as in your spirituality, being in the natural world, the wonder of music, faith in God, creativity, or love. You are part of something vast and wonderful.

Then turn the palms away from each other, back of hands touching each other. Reach further upwards through the arms, releasing from below the shoulder blades and sensing the feet on the ground. Lower the arms out at the sides, reaching out as in scraping the insides of a rainbow, until your arms come down fully.

Most helpful for performance or other anxiety:

Alternate Nostril Breathing

Five Pointed Star

Tongue and Jaw Resting Positions

Hands Stroking

Walking Smoothly

Four Phases of Breathing