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Small Flute Classes . . . Less Teaching, More Learning

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■ I first experienced the classroom method of teaching as a student at the Paris Conservatory after having taught flute in private lessons for six years at the University of Iowa. When I returned to the University of Iowa, I decided to experiment with teaching the flute myself in a classroom situation. After several years, I have become convinced by my enthusiastic, successful students that this method, combined with private instruction when there is time, is much more effective than private instruction alone.

During the nine months I spent in Paris in 1958-1959, I studied flute both as an auditor in the class of Gaston Crunelle at the Paris Conservatory and privately with both Crunelle and Jean-Pierre Rampal. Each professor at the Conservatory had his own method of classroom teaching. Some taught their class members individually; others taught them as a class. Crunelle taught individually in a class.

His classes met for four hours three times a week. Half the students reported on Tuesday, half on Thursday, and everybody came on Saturday. Each student had fifteen to twenty minutes of individual instruction time on Saturday, which was technique day, and about thirty minutes on Tuesday or Thursday, the *étude-solo* days. Each student was assigned a particular time for his lesson and always came early enough to listen to several lessons before his own and stayed long enough to listen to several afterwards. In that way, about five people were always present at each individual lesson.

Though I was only an auditor in the class, Crunelle occasionally let me play. Yet even when I only listened, I felt I learned a great deal. I discovered that it was easier to understand shared errors when these were pointed out to another person than when they were shown to oneself, and that there was a certain consolation in knowing that others had similar problems. I also felt that playing before one's classmates twice a week was good preparation for performing in public. Further, during the spring when the students devoted themselves exclusively to the solo written for the yearly examination, I found that hearing a new

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Small Flute Classes...

by Betty Bang

piece played from the beginning and accompanied by one of the fine pianists the Conservatory hired for this purpose made one learn the piece as a whole and as it was. The constant repetition of many students playing the same piece taught one the music by ear and gave each student the combined insights of the other players. I remember the day when a talented Swiss girl for the first time played the solo as if it were music. At the next session, many others were able to follow her lead.

When I returned to Iowa, I started a flute seminar. In addition to their private lessons, seven students met together in a class for one and a half hours a week and played for each other. Sometimes each would play his own piece; sometimes I would assign a single piece for the whole class. At first we worked with solos for flute alone. When I was able to get a pianist for an hour a week, we started through the standard repertoire. I found that students could learn music much faster in a class than alone; consequently they were able to cover a great deal more literature. The students loved the seminar. A close rapport developed among them and between them and me, and above all, it was fun.

The success of the seminar for university students prompted me to try class teaching during the summer two-week all-state music camp. The first year I set up two master classes with four students in each, each class meeting twice a week for two hours, to replace the two half-hour lessons each student was supposed

Less Teaching, More Learning

to receive. The first reaction came from students not in the classes who had been assigned to private lessons (the "control group"): they wanted to be in a class.

In the class sessions we went over various basic technical problems, worked on a few solos, and played flute quartets. Solos for the junior high group were the Donjon *Pan* and the Mozart *Andante in C*; those for the senior high class were the Gluck *Spirit Dance*, the first movement of the Mozart *Concerto No. 1 in G*, and Edgard Varèse's *Density 21.5*. I was particularly amazed at the kids' response to the Varèse piece. They loved it! I remember one saying, "I'd like to play this all alone, late at night"; another reacted immediately: "I'd be too scared!" The students learned three or four times as much in the classes as those taking private lessons did, for they were with me for a longer period of time and also had the advantage of learning from each other. Since the first summer, I have taught all my campers in class lessons, but have cut the length of the class sessions to save time.

As time went on, my classes differed more and more from those of Crunelle in Paris in that I did less and less teaching. I started asking the students to remark on things they liked and disliked or questioned in the class performances of their fellow students. I began sitting in the class with the students so that I was just another member of the group. The sessions became very interesting. We would all hear slightly different things to comment on. It was good ear training for me as well as for them, and we were all learning to analyze what we heard and wonder about it.

As enrollment increased at the University, I started dividing the students into smaller classes based on their levels of advancement and potential. The ideal size for a class seemed to be four people. Each student had a forty-five-minute private lesson and a one-hour class lesson a week (instead of a one-hour private lesson).

The material covered in a class is based on the needs and abilities of the students in the particular class. We work on technical exercises, orchestral studies, solos, and particular problems. One semester I grouped together four students who

had done poorly on the sight-reading part of their jury exams the previous semester. We spent the whole term on rhythm approached from many angles.

Sometimes I have grouped together four or five students giving recitals. All the students are asked to learn certain of the pieces to be played for each recital. Sometimes the recital accompanist comes in for the sessions; sometimes the class members play for each other. I prefer the students to learn the piano part themselves, for then they experience the music in three roles: as flutist, as pianist, and as listener. In Baroque pieces with a figured-bass accompaniment, I insist that each student learn to play the bass line on the piano, or if that is completely impossible even with work,

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I let them play it transposed up two octaves on the flute. Trio sonatas are studied with the students alternately playing all parts. Baroque concertos are rehearsed with one student playing the solo part, one playing the bass line, and two playing the violin parts. With five in the class, the viola part is added. I find that very little teaching needs to be done when students hear the music whole rather than as an isolated flute part.

Last year in a class of four older students, all first-rate performers on other instruments—saxophone, clarinet, bassoon, and recorder—who had played flute for one semester to two years, I used scale patterns from *Altès I*. During his turn in class, each student announced the keys he had learned and the metronome marking at which he was go-

ing to play them. Then each of the other students selected one of those scales for him to play with the metronome. Gradually each player learned all the keys and then increased his speed. If fingers moved stiffly, roughly, unevenly, we commented. This class also learned to play the opening phrase of Debussy's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* in one breath. They memorized the passage and then set the metronome at $\text{♩} = 120$ to see if they could manage it in one breath at this faster tempo. Gradually they slowed the metronome setting. For tonguing practice; they worked on the double tonguing exercise in *Altès II*, also played from memory and with a metronome, this time the metronome advancing from session to session. Finally, we played flute quartets. I played the fourth part while they alternated, playing first, second, and third, or conducting. The students were especially challenged by the tasks of the conductor.

Last summer in a class of advanced university students, we discussed teaching techniques. Each period was devoted to a different subject: tonguing, breathing, vibrato, and so on. Each student was assigned several pedagogical works (in English, German, or French, depending upon their language qualifications) to consult and report on.

A year ago, a class of five graduate students studied standard Baroque and Classical literature. Each student bought a copy of Franz Vester's *Flute Repertoire Catalogue* (Musica Rara, 1967) and was assigned a Baroque and a Classical composer. For each class period he brought in a performance of one piece by one of his composers. He recruited players of other instruments to play with him, rehearsed his group, and researched his piece so that he could give any interesting historical facts about it to the class. The classes, little lecture-recitals of solo and chamber music, were both enjoyable and instructive to everyone, including myself.

My flute techniques class has also been influenced by the idea of student participation. Varying in size from three to eight students, it meets three hours a week for five weeks. After getting everyone to make a sound on the head of the flute and explaining my technique in getting everyone to get a sound, I have the

class members take the heads of their classmates' flutes and place them in position on their classmates' lips while their classmates are blowing into space. Each member must find the proper placement of the head for every other person in the class. In a subsequent meeting, I ask one person to play while the others walk around him to see from all sides what aspects of his embouchure, hand position, posture, fingering, and so on might deserve comment. Since I dislike using a book before the student has developed a basic technique of playing the instrument, my first assignments are to make up a piece or exercise using the new material learned in class. The results are surprising. The students have developed much better tones than others did in previous



classes. And I get excellent technical studies, some rather nice flute alone pieces, rounds, and duets. Two students once brought in a popular march tune with a separate descant part, both parts played from memory. Another brought written-out parts for an original piece for seven flutes—one part for each member of the class. Even the dull or awkward pieces are beneficial in that they have made the student think about the instrument.

During one semester, I had a class of four high school students along with my regular university classes. They had two hours of class a week instead of one half-hour private lesson. We worked on technique, solos, and quartets. All felt we accomplished more in the class than we would have privately.

During the all-state music camp



in the summer of 1969, I had two classes, with four eleventh- and twelfth-grade students in each. I explained to the students what a good hand position was and then sat in the class as they criticized each other's positions while playing some finger exercises I had composed. In three sessions, with my admonishment to keep their fingers in the proper positions in their band and orchestra rehearsals during the camp, we were able to correct many bad habits. Each student tried the tonguing exercise from *Altès II*, and I worked with him while the others listened: "Open your throat," "Stress the first note of the first and third counts a little," "Pull your tongue away from your lip," "Don't move your chin," "Don't press the flute so hard against your lower lip." By the third session, each had improved amazingly; some had completely revised their way of tonguing. Using the *Sight Reading Book* by Charles Colin, I taught them to conduct with their flute while playing—a technique that is not only useful in leading small ensembles, but helpful in developing rhythmic coordination and the correct reading and performance of rhythms. In all cases, these students learned to conduct while playing in the two weeks; some of my university students have taken much longer! Using the second movement of Bach's *E Minor Sonata* and the "Bourrée Anglaise" from his *A Minor Partita*, my students learned to articulate with the Quantzian syllables *ti di ri di ri* in one week. I believe my three hours with each class plus their individual practice time—which couldn't have been too much considering their full rehearsal schedule—proved much more beneficial to the students than private lessons would have, taking twice as much of my time.

The time may come when the number of students wanting to take lessons will force us to teach only in classes, except for recital rehearsals. Perhaps that will turn out to be the better way. Public school teachers have long been burdened with more students than they can really handle. The classroom method of teaching would allow them to reach more students more effectively. I hope my experiences teaching flute in the classroom will encourage other teachers to experiment with this effective method of learning. ☐