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Teaching Flute to the Blind and Visually Impaired

Katharine Flanders Mukherji

no point in writing fingerings or admonitions about hand positions, so all of that goes on tape. The cassette becomes the equivalent of an assignment book. (I don't

tape the whole lesson.)

If a client sees fairly well I use a large felt-tipped marker pen and write things such as key signature lists and scale assignments. In a case like this I use large-lined staff paper in 50-page 11" x 17" pads with four staves to a page. It is difficult to learn to make the note heads as large as possible, but it can make the difference between illegibility and legibility. One of my students can see only red, so I use red marker pen for his music!

For students with good partial sight there is available the relatively new technique of photocopy enlargement.

If the maximum setting is insufficient, one can enlarge an already enlarged copy. This necessitates a certain amount of cutting and taping, and results in enormous pages with very little music on a page, but it's better than nothing.

Some students have a monocular attachment on that side of their eyeglasses. The problem with this is that although they can read regular (clearly) printed music, their field of vision is limited to a measure or less. This means that the skill of reading ahead while playing, which most students find difficult, is all the more necessary and difficult.

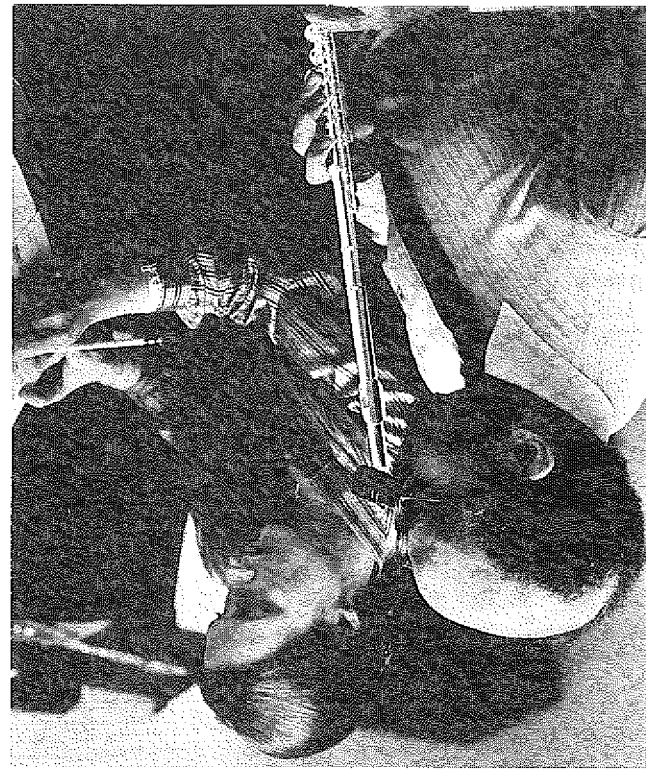
The major difference in the format of lessons is that études cease to be worth the trouble. It becomes worthwhile to spend extra time on scale and arpeggio patterns which are easy to memorize and play in all keys, saving the use of sophisticated memory skills for repertoire worth knowing for years. This is as true for Braille readers as for large print readers, and for any whom the mere deciphering of a new piece is such a strain. Even for those who are reading, it is an arduous and laborious process. Grace notes are indecipherable. Sharps, flats, and natural accidentals are almost indistinguishable one from another. Helpful editors who add redundant accidentals as "reminders" do a terrible disservice. Line changing is awkward. Locating a specific spot is hard because scanning is poor. There is no point in referring to measure numbers. (too tiny) Even counting measures is difficult because the bar lines can be hard to make out.

As a result (even if I am at the piano accompanying a student) it is often worthwhile to hop up and point to the spot I wish to return to, rather than wasting time while the student searches for it. On the other hand, even students with normal vision are often very slow at this. They must acquire the skill of absorbing an instruction rapidly and acting upon it. Any student must learn to find "three

notes. When teaching a rank beginner, with whatever kind of visual impairment, I usually prefer to use a cassette player, and to teach notes, scales, and tunes by ear and by rote. Unless a student has quite a bit of vision, there is

any possibility of reading the Braille notation while performing, and even this is too difficult unless the music is slow.) Typically, at a Braille reader's lesson a guide dog will be dozing in a corner of our studio. Once in a while we hear whines of protest as the student attempts some high

When I tell people that I teach flute at the Lighthouse Music School of the New York Association for the Blind, their first question is "But how do your students learn a new piece?" I begin by explaining that my students are blind or visually impaired, which implies a broad range of abilities and disabilities. To suit the needs of these students there are a variety of options for studying music. For those students who are completely or virtually blind, the best choice is Braille music. Instrumentalists must read, memorize and then play. (Only a singer has any possibility of reading the Braille notation while performing, and even this is too difficult unless the music is slow.) Typically, at a Braille reader's lesson a guide dog will be dozing in a corner of our studio. Once in a while we hear whines of protest as the student attempts some high



Katharine Flanders Mukherji teaching a visually impaired student at the Lighthouse Music School.

measures before the double bar" or "the bar we started at last time," or "the note you just stopped on!" The vision-impaired musician should try to develop these skills as much as possible, and the teacher should quell the urge to point all the time.

Since approving smiles or disapproving gestures (all but the most vigorous head shakes or nods) are useless, description becomes all the more important. Touching a student's fingers, wrists, elbows and shoulders to demonstrate positional corrections becomes much more necessary than with sighted students. In beginning lessons it is important to verbalize a description of embouchure for the student who can't see his teacher. I find myself using phrases like "close-mouthed smile," "stretched like a rubber band," "hole made as if by a pencil point" etc.

In fact, just teaching a beginner to take the flute out of the case and put it together requires extra attention. Have you ever noticed that in taking the flute apart two of the three pieces have to be turned around to put them away? Just opening the case right-side-up may present a small challenge, as does lining up the headjoint. Some sort of marker really helps with this. Try threading a cleaning rod with your eyes closed. Not so easy, is it?

For those who are reading, it is imperative to have the stand at eye level. One tall young man and I devised the method of placing a heavy black stand on top of the desk and then lowering it to eye level. Many stands aren't tall enough. We also use a stand light because in very few rooms does the overhead light really provide enough strong and direct lighting.

The Braille music notation system is derived from, but is not the same as literary Braille. The raised dots representing the letter d in literary Braille were chosen to represent "do" (known to us as c) Everything follows in sequence. Literary Braille e is "re" or d) and so forth. So for a music student who already reads literary Braille and is just beginning to learn music Braille the music must "look" like a B flat clarinet part. Then of course there are symbols for register changes, rhythms, dynamics, articulations, etc. Sometimes one measure stretches across a whole page (if it has enough accents, dynamics and other instructions). The registers are referred to in piano parlance as fourth, fifth, and sixth octaves. If a piece begins in the low register, that is stated at the beginning and until it drifts into the fifth octave no further mention is made about register. The system is imperfect. The symbol representing a whole note is reused for a sixteenth note; the half note and 32nd note are symbolized the same way, and so on. One depends on the meter to decide which it is.

Since I don't read Braille, I keep my own printed copy in front of me as I teach my Braille-reading students a new piece. Fortunately they learn to read from my colleagues, the theory teachers. We have a sizable library of Braille and large print music. The best source is the Library of Congress National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, which provides long-term loans.

It is also possible to buy Braille music from the American Printing House for the Blind in Kentucky. There are other Braille music libraries in major cities around.

The second most-frequently-asked question about my experience with the blind is "Oh, do they have wonderful ears? They must all be very talented." And here, of course, we are encountering a prejudice of the same sort that makes people think certain ethnic or racial groups as "great dancers...such good rhythm" or "brilliant scientists...so smart." My blind students are like any other cross-section of the population. Some are fast, some slow, some produce a lovely tone easily, some don't. Some can pick out "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" after six lessons; most cannot. Actually, for all of the differences I have pointed out, teaching a visually handicapped person is much like teaching anyone else. A good teacher tailors the teaching style to the individual student. Some people are more adept with small motor skills; some are quicker to understand an explanation; some have had much more exposure to music as listeners; some find memorizing fairly easy; others find sightreading comes pretty naturally. Some people need a lot of help with tone production, some with breathing, some with intonation. An impairment is really just another element to add into the equation. The pleasure and joy a student derives from playing a duet or a sonata or a trio sonata with others is universal. The satisfaction he gains from mastering a once-difficult piece or technique is universal.

Whatever level he achieves, there are challenges and fulfillments which may be all the more important to one who encounters greater impediments in daily life than most of us.

Katharine Flanders Mukherji received her A.B. degree from Harvard University. Her major flute teachers have been Samuel Baron and James Pappoutsakis, and Michel Debost in France. She is a founding member of Musicians' Accord, a N. Y. new music ensemble, with which she has played N. Y. premieres by several contemporary composers, and contemporary classics by many others. In addition to free-lancing and private teaching she has been teaching at the Lighthouse since 1974.

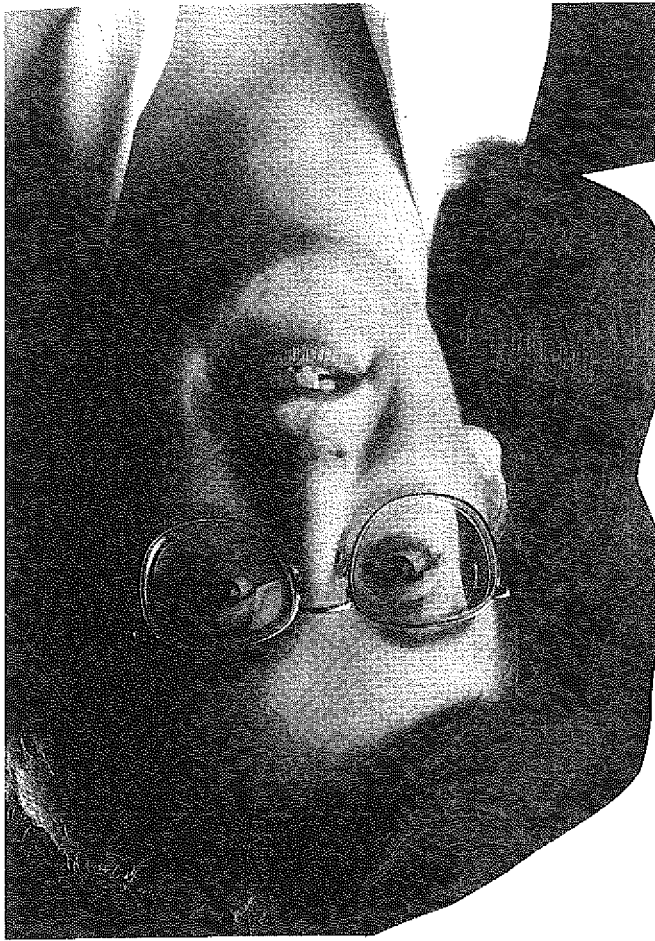
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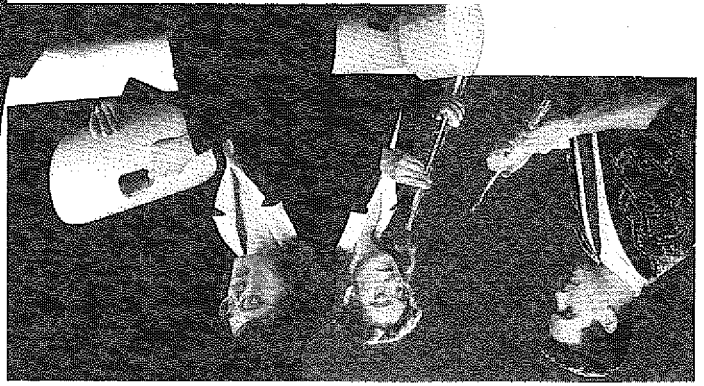
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