

# Building finger dexterity

Niall O’Riordan *on ways to develop your technique*

When discussing flute playing, many people mistake finger dexterity for technique. There is, however, much more to flute technique than just having fast fingers. Other vital aspects of flute technique, such as tone and articulation, have to have a solid foundation so that they fit together with the movement of the fingers like a jigsaw. If any one of these aspects is uncoordinated or less developed than the rest, the results can be disappointing. I have heard people play at breakneck speed, but somehow the ‘magic’ isn’t there for me. When I ask myself why this is the case, I often discover it is something to do with the clarity of tone or articulation that is lacking. When we hear these aspects of technique in clear coordination, however, the results can be very exciting, even at speeds that are slower than might be expected. For me, a good flute technique is a coordinated technique, with a good balance between all the various aspects. Keeping this in mind, and understanding that finger dexterity practised without consideration of the other technical aspects is of little use, I would like to offer some suggestions for improving finger dexterity using methods that I have found effective over the years.

## Some priorities

Cultivating an easy, efficient, and light movement of each finger should be a goal. The movement of our fingers involves a complex arrangement of many muscle groups in coordination with each other. Establishing a good posture and hand position is the foundation of this. Finding a good hand position relies on two things. The first of these is solid advice from your teacher (you may want to research the Rockstro grip), while the second part is self-directed. It is learnt through experience. You will find this through a process of practising various exercises. Verbal instruction alone will not help you find a comfortable and efficient position for your hands; such instructions can merely be a signpost. If we keep this in mind and practise independence of each finger while paying attention to the body and its comfort, over time you will consciously and unconsciously make micro-adjustments to find a position for your hands that allows your fingers to move freely. From my own experience this process continues to evolve and refine itself the more I play.

## A word on virtuosity

In this article I have included an array of resources to help with developing finger dexterity; however, the way we practise

these is important. Virtuosity cannot be rushed. It is a slow journey that requires patience. Progress is never linear, and at times when you least expect it your advancement can suddenly leap forward. A very common mistake lies in trying to play too fast too soon. I have experimented recently in my practice with picking a metronome mark at which I can play everything with a sense of ease. Rather than pushing the speed forward, I continue with the same tempo and instead I look at discovering ways of making what I can play easily feel even easier. I find this strategy very effective and, once I move the tempo forward, I find it requires far less time to reach the tempo I am aiming for.

## The exercises

### Taffanel & Gaubert Exercises Journaliers EJ1 & EJ2

These two exercises are extremely popular, however, and there are a number of easier versions written by other teachers which are available online and elsewhere. If you can obtain these, it is likely to be helpful to work on them before attempting the originals. Without careful attention these exercises can become very sloppy, reflected in the movement of fingers and evenness of rhythm, especially if they are attempted too early in the process of developing your technique. The apparent simplicity of this five-note pattern can be misleading.

### Trevor Wye Practice Book 2 ‘Technique’

The variations written by Trevor Wye for his essential book on technique were inspired by EJ1 & EJ2 and are excellent for gaining greater independence of the fingers within this simple five note passage. I recommend that these variations be practised before EJ1 and EJ2. The scale exercises ‘Series A-F’ all focus on one repeated movement pattern, together with the five-note pattern. I have added a long note at the end in the following examples to show how I use these exercises in my own practice. These motifs are great for developing an even touch on the keys.

Lifting and depressing our fingers in order to create the repeated movement required by these all of these exercises (shown opposite) is a surprisingly complex act for the nervous system. Coordination is the key here. The opposing muscles must not fight each other but work together to create effortless and seamless movement. Our nervous system must learn what is needed to lift the fingers, what is needed to put the fingers back down and to make distinctions between necessary and



Taffanel and Gaubert EJ1



Trevor Wye Series A



Trevor Wye Series B



Trevor Wye Series C



Trevor Wye Daily Exercise II

unnecessary effort. If we go too quickly we do not get the chance to pay attention to what we are doing. If you play or practise without proper attention you most likely will engage parasitic effort, and if this extra effort becomes habituated it can be very difficult to eradicate later on. I also believe this extra effort contributes to the painful hand problems that develop for an alarming number of players these days. I suggest that you cultivate a sense of ease and lightness and instead anchor this feeling into your playing as you progress. I'm not advocating that you spend your days practising at slow speeds; if you follow my suggestions eventually your body will tell you when it's ready to move faster, and it will feel spontaneous and easy. Time spent exploring and eradicating unnecessary effort will contribute to playing quickly and with greater ease later.

#### Further Variations on Taffanel & Gaubert EJ1

The following variations on the same five note pattern are excellent, particularly for establishing a good hand position. When you descend in the scale you can establish a good position of your fingers over the keys before you play. The variations that then follow overleaf can help you maintain and explore

that good positioning. I was somewhat disappointed when I discovered these variations in a book by Peter-Lukas Graf because I had felt rather pleased that I had come up with them myself; later I also heard these variations in a YouTube video by Sir James Galway. Given Moysé's legacy to flute playing, I think, in fact, that there are very few new finger exercises and variations on scales left to discover; nonetheless, the process of coming up with new ones for yourself is still very valuable. Even if you later find your 'new' exercises have been written by others before you, I encourage you to experiment with developing your own. When we create our own exercises we are actively creating solutions to our own specific difficulties.

#### Equalisation of the fingers

I've already explained the importance of coordination in lifting and depressing the keys and the involvement of different muscle groups. If you look at the flute studies and exercises by Italian composers, Rabboni and Lorenzo, there are numerous exercises to assist with developing the equalisation of the fingers.

## Technique



Taffanel and Gaubert variation 1



Taffanel and Gaubert variation 2



Taffanel and Gaubert variation 3



Taffanel and Gaubert variation 4



Taffanel and Gaubert EJ1



Lorenzo *L'Indispensabile*



Paul Edmund-Davies *28 Day Warm Up Book*

### Lorenzo *L'Indispensabile* A complete Modern School

Variations such as these are excellent for gaining greater independence of each finger and are probably the most demanding for coordination. A sample exercise is given opposite.

### Paul Edmund-Davies

The exercises in Paul Edmund-Davies' book, *The 28 Day Warm-up Book*, are also inspired by the Italian school. The technical exercises in this book are excellent and I can highly recommend it. Given opposite is another variation by Paul Edmund-Davies on Taffanel and Gaubert EJ1.

There are many other excellent resources. When working on technical issues, repetition with variation is a very good strategy to use. Don't stick to the same finger exercises for too long: it is better to change your routine regularly, perhaps even every two weeks or so. Above all find ways to enjoy it, take regular rests, and remember you are not practising this for tomorrow, but rather next year. Don't push for immediate results; instead, give yourself the space you need to cultivate a finger technique that will serve you for a lifetime.

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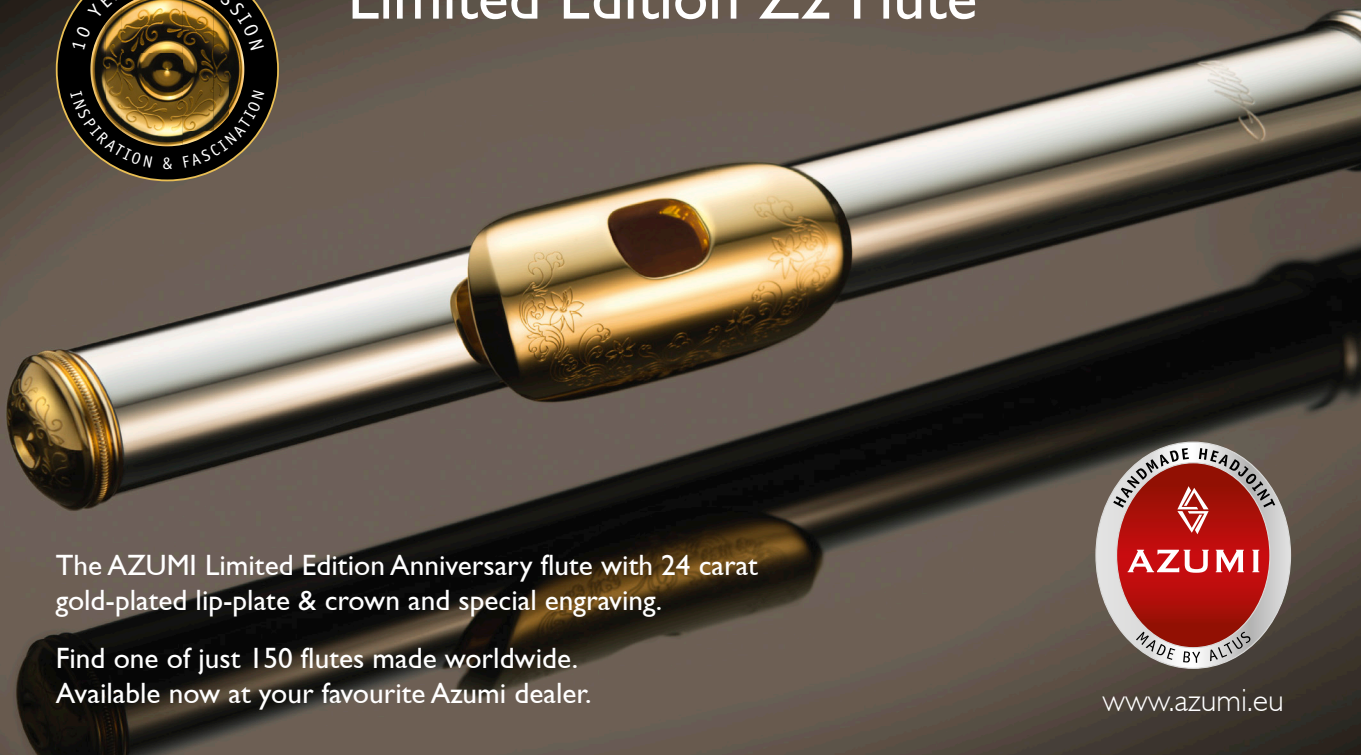
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