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LUTIST ТНЕ QUARTERLY

Fluice Phonics Using Vowel Shapes to Color Tone



Celso Woltzenlogel: Flute Ambassador of Brazil **Using Flute Excerpts to Reinforce Music Theory** 2019 NFA Flute Convention

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A celebrated jazz and improvisational flutist describes how he shapes tone colors to create a full cast of "characters" in his musical performances.

reating meaningful work requires surrender to an aesthetic sensibility; creating a compelling musical performance is to surrender to this aesthetic truth. The voice of this truth is tone.

Before the melodic and harmonic meaning of the first notes in a piece are given context, and before the rhythmic groove has us tapping our feet or headed to the dance floor, we experience an emotional reaction to the sound. This is the power of tone.

I tap into tone using tools that I call flute phonics.

by Matt Eakle



Tones of Many Colors

Your tone is your voice. Just as an actor assumes the voice of a character, a musician chooses an appropriate voice—tone—for the music. Speaking in more than one voice prepares the performer for the portrayal of a wider variety of roles.

David Subke, my flute mentor, introduced me to the concept that the flute is capable of producing a broad array of tone colors, each conveying a different musical meaning. He described a continuum of tone across a spectrum, with "eyeglass fogging" at one extreme and "edgy" at the other.

I associate the foggy tone with soft, delicate clouds, mossy rocks, and quiet streams. An edgy tone evokes rugged rock, raging rivers, knife blades, and fine crystal.

But it is how the two extremes of tone evoke emotions that make them powerful musical performance tools. The eyeglass fogging tone conveys serenity, melancholy, tenderness, or introspection; the edgy tone better portrays exhilaration, anger, conflict, and celebration. Irony can be expressed by delivering an angry message with a sweet tone, or vice versa.

If we listen to a note as it changes from foggy to edgy while watching an oscilloscope display that represents the amplitude of the harmonics, we can see a clear difference. The foggier tone is weighted towards the fundamental, whereas with the other end, the edgier the tone is, the bigger the amplitude of the successive harmonics will be.



This graph shows increasing amplitude of the harmonics. (Also: Watch and listen at FQ Plus.)

Edgy Vowel Shapes

In flute phonics, I use a progression of vowel shapes to create the entire range of flute sounds, from the edgiest to the foggiest. (Aperture and air speed also affect tone; more about them below.) In addition to the flute phonics exercises described here, I have created a corresponding video, which is posted at *FQ Plus*.

For the edgiest tone, I shape the inside of my mouth and throat to form the vowel sound EE. I squinch up my face and imitate a terrible 2-year-old throwing a tantrum yelling, "Meany, meany, meany, meany!" The sound should come through the nose almost as much as the mouth.

In speech, the front teeth are usually exposed, as in the "say cheese!" smile. When playing the flute, we maintain a flute embouchure with our lips while shaping the interior of our mouths to the vowel shapes. I like saying "meany" for the EE because the M keeps my lips in a flute embouchure while the N encourages resonance in my nose.

To make the EE, close the jaw until the front teeth are about an eighth of an inch apart. The tip of the tongue touches the inside of the bottom lip and creates an arch producing a very small air pocket behind the upper front teeth. The top of the arched tongue touches the roof of the mouth leaving a tiny opening through which air is forced, adding a slight hissing noise to the vowel sound.

With your flute up to your lips and ready to play, say the vowel sound using your voice. Then—without taking a breath, and maintaining the same mouth shape—disengage your vocal cords and blow a note on the flute. Does the flute tone evoke the sound of the spoken vowel? That's the goal.

Softening the Tone

Beginning with the EE sound, the first step away from the edge is the short I (as in "bit"). As the tongue drops slightly, the hissing lowers in pitch as the size of the chamber behind the front teeth slightly increases, and the air slows down in speed and increases in quantity. (On the next page, images illustrate the formations.)

From the short I, go to the short E (as in "bet"). The tongue drops a little more, so there's less hissing and a slightly larger air pocket behind the top front teeth.

From the short E, move to the short A (as in "hat"). The tongue drops still more, making the air pocket behind the front teeth substantial.

Continuing from the short A, the sound changes to the short U (as in "hut"). From there, it morphs into AH (as in "mama").



Eakle and Mike Barnett, among others in the David Grisman Sextet, perform in San Francisco.

At this point, the mouth cavity is fairly cavernous, providing room for the lower harmonics to resonate. Notice that the corners of the lips—which had been pulled back to form the EE—are relaxing, and the jaw has opened considerably, making the mouth cavity larger.

From AH, it goes to O (as in "no"). Notice that now the corners of the lips are coming together, which they will continue to do.

The two extremes of tone are "eyeglass fogging" at one end and "edgy" at the other. But it is how these extremes evoke emotions that makes them into powerful musical performance tools.

Next comes OO (as in "look"). Open your throat as if to yawn while shaping the mouth cavity to form the OO vowel shape. For maximum resonance, keep your tongue flat on the bottom of the mouth.

Finally, open your throat even more and make a big fat American U (as in Lucy). Now, the interior air volume of the mouth is at maximum and the lips are almost pursed. Imagine filling your mouth and throat with as much water as possible to squirt your big brother or sister. (Well, maybe not *that* much!) You might find yourself actually yawning. Good! Yawning means you're doing things right!

Now reverse direction, stretching out the transition from each vowel shape, one to the next until you come to the EE that's coming through your nose.

Air speed and the shape of the lip aperture also have a dramatic effect on tone. Practice long tones using all the vowel shapes with a flat, ribbon-shaped air stream and notice how the sound changes as you move toward a round, cylindrical-shaped air stream.

Also try faster and slower air speeds, covering more or less of the embouchure hole, and changing the direction of the air stream up and down. Tim Day and Robin McKee, the husbandand-wife virtuosi flutists in the San Francisco Symphony, are proponents of "slow air"—using the least air possible to make the most sound.



Every tone color portrays musical meaning.

Speaking, Singing, Playing

In normal speech, we don't come close to either end of the spectrum that I have described. The flute—unlike the voice— is on the opposite side of the lips from the resonating chamber of the mouth, so one has to exaggerate the vowel shapes for a noticeable result.

That's why I recommend mimicking voices. There's a cartoon character corresponding to each band of the entire tonal spectrum of the voice. (See 06:02–06:29 in the video. For additional examples of the vowel shapes, see 10:42–12:06.)

Using vowel shapes regulates the size of the mouth's resonating chamber to emphasize specific harmonics. Start by singing the vowel at the pitch you're going to play. Feel how you shape your mouth for that vowel; notice in particular your tongue.

Then, while keeping your mouth shape the same, quit vibrating your vocal cords and play notes on the flute.

Repeat the process using the following vowel shapes:

1. U ("Lucy") emphasizes the fundamental pitch. This requires opening the inside of your mouth on the low notes to the degree that it feels like you could hold a basketball in there. Yawning is good! Think big goofy cartoon animal voices.

2. OO ("look") brings out the first harmonic, the octave. The mouth cavity is one-half the size of U.

3. O ("no") emphasizes the second harmonic, a fifth above the octave. The mouth cavity is one-third its original size and two-thirds the size of OO.

4. AH ("mama") emphasizes the third harmonic, a fourth above the second harmonic and two octaves above the fundamental. The mouth cavity is now one-fourth its original size and three-fourths the size of O.

5. A ("hat") brings out the fourth harmonic, a major third above the third harmonic. The mouth cavity is one-fifth its original size and four-fifths the size of AH.

6. E ("bet") is the vowel shape of the fifth harmonic, a minor third above the fourth harmonic. The mouth cavity is one-sixth its original size and five-sixths the size of A.

7. I ("bit") emphasizes the sixth harmonic, a little less than a minor third above the fifth harmonic. The mouth cavity is one-seventh its original size and six-sevenths the size of E.

8. EE ("eeny-meany") emphasizes the seventh harmonic, a major second or so above the sixth harmonic and three octaves above the fundamental. The mouth cavity is one-eighth its original size and seven-eighths the size of I. For higher harmonics, keep making the mouth smaller. Think itty bitty cartoon animal voices.



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Paul Horn's flute, here being played by John Lennon as Horn watches, is now with Matt Eakle.

Practicing Flute Phonics

The higher you go, the closer the successive harmonics get to each other and the smaller the corresponding difference in mouth size gets. With practice, you can hear each harmonic "speak" as you go from vowel shape to vowel shape up the harmonic series.

You may find the harmonics don't correspond to the vowel shapes exactly the way I describe, but it's probably pretty close. Mouths are shaped differently, and we pronounce our vowels differently, so experiment and discover what works best for you. The goal is to consciously control your tone by shaping the resonating chamber of your mouth to get the sound you want.

Vowel shapes should change for different notes and registers on the flute. Intervals pop out easily when the mouth cavity changes in size corresponding to the resonance of the notes. When jumping big intervals from low to high, I often use the big mouth U, O, or AH for the low note and move to a short A, E, I, or long EE for the high note. I reverse the vowel shapes when jumping down from high to low, being sensitive to what vowel shape makes the note reverberate.

When practicing flute phonics, start off in the low register, where the effects are most dramatic. Coloration is more subtle in the high register. To hear the harmonics better, try wearing hearing protectors or ear plugs while playing long tones and going through the progression of vowel shapes. You'll hear the harmonics resonating inside your head.

When improvising, I sometimes want my sound to morph from the bamboo flute sounds of U with a huge mouth cavity, incorporating the sound of "wasted" air in the tone, to an EE tone, so thick with harmonics they clash with each other and create interference tones—in a single phrase! Some of my tonal ideas derive from listening to and imitating traditional Japanese shakuhachi flute, where air noise, vocalizations, split tones, note bending, and other tonal effects are used as ornamentation. Sometimes I imitate the feedback sounds of electric guitars or the airy tone of Lester Young playing tenor saxophone.

Your Musical Performance

PHOTOS COURTESY MATT EAKLE.

Practicing tonal extremes develops control of the inflections that convey the emotional content of the music. As casting director



Eakle poses with 2010 NFA Convention attendees in Anaheim.

for your performance, visualize the character who best delivers the emotional meaning of the music, then search for the flute tone that gives voice to that character. Be a mystic, a hero, a jilted lover, the voice of the river and the sky.

Let your flute give voice to your imagination! Be adventurous! Take chances! Take command!

Matt Eakle has played with the David Grisman Quintet since 1989 and is featured on 14 CDs with the DGQ, Jerry Garcia, Enrique Coria, and his own jazz trio. He has performed in rock and jazz bands and symphonic, ballet, and opera orchestras. Grammy-nominated recordings are Simple Pleasures with banjoist Alison Brown, So What with Garcia, and Dawg 90 with DGQ; he also has recorded on Chris Isaak's Notice the Ring and Bonnie Raitt's Home. Eakle recreates Japanese, Arabic, Native American, and East Indian flute sounds with a silver flute using note bending, growls, singing, percussive sounds, and circular breathing and has recorded with Zakir Hussain (Indian tabla), Shirley Muramoto (Japanese koto), Vince Delgado (Arabic percussionist) and Afqat Ali Khan (Pakistani singer). Eakle produced the Headwaters Project music compilation in support of efforts to preserve the Headwaters Forest in northern California. He was musical director of the documentary film Who Bombed Judi Bari? about an assassination attempt on an environmental and labor activist, and he played in the documentary The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill. Visit matteakle.com.

Find it at FQ Plus

Visit FQ Plus for Eakle's video demonstrating the concepts described here and to see an animated graph of harmonics amplitudes. Also find a special interview with Eakle by Ali Ryerson. (Video production courtesy Lessonface.com.) These features can be found in the Publications section at nfaonline.org.