

A Primer in Practical Alternative Fingerings

Change pitch or dynamics and ease fast or difficult passages with adjusted fingerings. Specific illustrations help show you how.

by Nestor Herszbaum

Alternative fingerings are an invaluable tool to extend the possibilities and to overcome certain shortcomings of the flute. They allow flutists to correct intonation problems, play technical passages more flowingly, and change the color of notes, giving performance more variety.

Boehm,¹ the creator of the modern flute, was aware of the problems of his flute system and provided a chart of "Special Fingerings"² to facilitate certain passages and notes. He wrote, "The irregular fingerings may be used not only for facilitating certain passages, but also they may be made valuable in many cases for enharmonic differences, such as between F# and Gb."³

The challenge flutists face when presented with a difficult musical passage is to find the best possible way to perform it. This often involves the use of alternative fingerings, but sometimes flutists hesitate to use them for lack of understanding of their application.⁴ Dividing possible alternatives into three categories

can help in understanding and selecting fingerings for varying instances: fingerings to change the pitch, dynamics, and color; fingerings to solve technical passages; and harmonic fingerings.

PITCH, DYNAMICS, AND COLOR

This category of alternative fingerings can be used to lower or raise the pitch and to

aid extreme dynamics. The most useful fingerings in this category are those that closely resemble the regular fingerings. Flutists tend to remember those fingerings easier; therefore, they are more likely to use them. Experiment by adding or removing fingers next to the first vented hole to lower or raise the pitch of a note. Try half-covered holes or depressing only the key ring on open-hole flutes, and experiment using different foot joint keys.⁵ (Examples A & B)

Prokofiev: Sonata, end 1st movement

A

pp

F3

Bb3

The Bb3 tends to be flat on most flutes. Choosing fingerings that raise the pitch of both the F3 and Bb3, such as the ones given above, allows this passage to be played very quietly and better in tune.

Borne: Carmen Variations

B

E3

This fingering for E3 not only raises the pitch, but also changes the color and allows the player to sustain that note more easily. Open the trill-key slightly to avoid being too sharp and to avoid making the sound too hollow.

E3

This fingering also helps raise the pitch, but with no change in color. Vent the A-key slightly by sliding the middle finger forward.

TECHNICAL PASSAGES

The second category of alternatives can be used to play fast and awkward passages more flowingly. As a general rule, try to find fingers that can stay down throughout a passage without adversely affecting the tone quality and pitch. Trill and tremolo fingerings are extremely useful in fast passages.

On this subject Walfrid Kujala wrote: "One of the principles I follow in recommending alternate fingerings centers around the liberalization of the right hand little fin-

ger. All formal fingering charts specify that the D# key should be down (open) for all notes except C1, C#1, D1, D2, Bb3, B3, C4, C#4, and D4. Most flutists have conscientiously learned their basic fingerings with-

out realizing that having the pinky up has no adverse acoustical effect on the notes of the first two octaves, as well as many of the third octave notes except for E1 and E2."⁶ (Examples C & D)

Prokofiev: Classical Symphony, 4th movement

C

The balance of the instrument is improved by $\text{d}^{\text{fl}} \text{fl}$ holding throughout the entire passage.

F#2

A2

D3

F#3

A3

B3

C#4

D4

Try also the fingerings above. This is a clear example of where alternative fingerings excel. Even though this passage is possible with regular fingerings, the addition of the right hand pinky in the way described above allows the flutist to achieve a much smoother technique at the fast tempo marking.

Respighi: Pines of Rome, 1st movement

D

① D3

② E3

③ Bb3

The first and second groups can be started either with the regular fingering for D3 and E3 or with the ones given above. If you choose to start with the regular fingerings, switch to the alternative fingering for the third 32nd note of both groups.

HARMONIC FINGERINGS FOR FAST TEMPO AND COLOR

Harmonic fingerings, which fall into the third category of alternative fingerings, are useful in fast passages in the high register and also as a means to change the color and the pitch. Harmonic fingerings often make the pitch flat; therefore, they are most useful in fast, loud passages in the third octave. Composers often use harmonic fingerings

to convey an eerie mood or to simply change the color of a note. Modern French composers used harmonics frequently for pp notes.⁷ (Examples E, F, G, & H)

Harmonic fingerings also can assist in efforts to change the color and the pitch of passages. (Examples I & J)

I hope these examples will spark an interest to experiment with and search for alternative fingerings. They are a great tool that is often overlooked. Try to find the fingerings that

best suit your flute's scale and your style of playing. Always evaluate the musical context in which fingerings will be used, keeping in mind that the ultimate goal of alternative fingerings is to enhance your musical performance.

© Copyright 2005 Nestor Herszbaum

Nestor Herszbaum is the author of *Alternative Fingerings for the Flute* (Herszbaum.com, 2003). He is the Principal Flutist of the Kansas City Symphony.

Prokofiev: Classical Symphony, 4th movement⁸

E $\text{♩} = 152$

p *p*

B3

A3

F#3

D3

This passage is very awkward due to the fast tempo and the high register. Try the fingerings shown here. Overblow F#3 & D3 (the harmonics of B1 and G1). On the first and second bars, use the regular fingering for the first beat F#3; alternative fingerings can be used thereafter.

Ravel: Mother Goose Suite

F $\text{♩} = 116$

p

G#3

F#3

A#3

Overblow G#3 & F#3 (harmonics of C#2 & B1). Start playing harmonic fingerings on the second beat of the first bar, and keep using them until the end of the passage. Harmonic fingerings make possible playing this passage more flowingly.

Jolivet: Chant de Linos, ending

G $\text{♩} = 120$

p

D3

F3

G3

A3

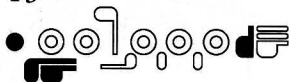
Overblow D3, F3 & G3 (the harmonics of G1, Bb1 and C2). This passage also can be played with regular fingerings, but, depending on the tempo, it can be very awkward to do so. The harsh tone caused by the harmonic fingerings is somewhat less evident here given the fact that the passage is played fortissimo and quickly. Play the first and last D3 with its regular fingering.

Borne: Carmen Variations

H



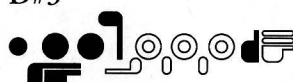
F3



E3

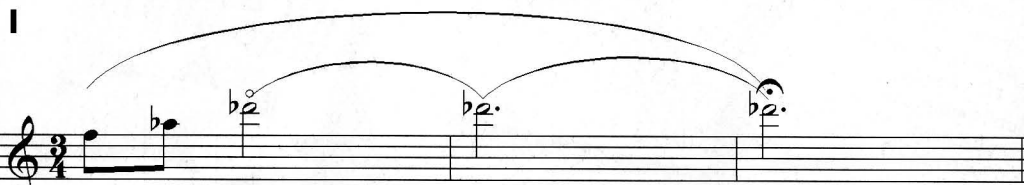


D#3



Overblow F3, E3 & D#3 (the harmonics of Bb1, A1, and G#1). Start the harmonic fingerings on the first 32nd note and play the F on the downbeat of the third bar with its regular fingering. The harmonic fingerings here allow the flutist to play with more bravura.

Ibert: Concerto, end 2nd movement



Db3



Db3

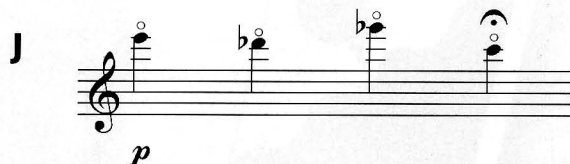


Use one or the other fingering. If playing the harmonic low Db accurately is problematic, use the second fingering, which will ensure that the Db3 comes out easily and in tune.

Notes

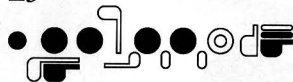
1. "Theobald Boehm, of Munich — born on April 9, 1794 — died on November 25, 1881 — a celebrated Royal Bavarian Court-Musician, and inventor of the modern flute, described his inventions in a treatise "Die Flöte und das Flötenspiel," which was published in pamphlet form, in Munich, in 1871." Boehm, Theobald, *The Flute and Flute Playing* (translation by Dayton C. Miller), Translator's Introduction.
2. The "Special Fingering" chart shows fingerings for: F#/Gb1, C#/Db2, F#/Gb2, C3, C#/Db3, F#/Gb3, G#/Ab3, and A3. Boehm, page 74.
3. Boehm, page 74.
4. The determination of the so-called correct fingering for a note is the result of over a century of practical experience of flute performers and designers. This does not mean that one must always "go by the book." To the contrary, the very flexibility of the instrument provides the player with the color, pitch, and mechanical versatility to meet any needs of concept or technique." Stevens, Roger S., *Artistic Flute technique and study*, page 102.
5. Herszbaum, Nestor, *Alternative Fingerings for the Flute*, Tips to Finding New Alternative Fingerings, page 1.
6. Kujala, Walfrid, *The Flutist's Vade Mecum*, Practical Guide 1.
7. "The sounds of the flute harmonics can be and are exploited in very interesting fashion in impressionistic music by some of the more color-imaginative, modern composers. The flutist who is adept in using these colors can further enhance the performance of some music by adding his own imagination to that of the composer." Stevens, page 103.
8. "The following (two) excerpt(s) appear on auditions to show the players' technical facility and rhythmic stability at an extremely fast tempo. Be sure to note the tempo marking of half note=152." Baxtresser, Jeanne, *Orchestral Excerpts for Flute*, page 23.
9. These harmonics are Ibert's own notation.

Ibert: Concerto cadenza, 3rd movement⁹



The alternative harmonic fingerings can help bring up the pitch of E3 and Gb3.

E3



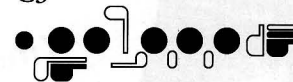
Db3



Gb3



C3



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altès, Henri. *Célèbre méthode complète de flûte*. Paris: Leduc, 1956.
- Artaud, Pierre-Yves & Geay, Gérard. *Present Day Flutes*. Paris: Éditions Jobert, 1980.
- Bartolozzi, Bruno. *New sounds for Woodwind*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Baxtresser, Jeanne. *Orchestral Excerpts for Flute*. Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser Co., 1995.
- Boehm, Theobald. *The Flute and Flute Playing* (translated by Dayton C. Miller). New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1871.
- Dick, Robert. *The Other Flute: a performance manual of contemporary techniques*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Herszbaum, Nestor. *Alternative Fingerings for the Flute*. USA: Herszbaum.com, 2003.
- Kujala, Walfrid. *The Flutist's Vade Mecum of Scales, Arpeggios, Trills and Fingering Technique*. Evanston, IL: Progress Press, 1995.
- Pellerite, James. *A Modern Guide to Fingerings*. Bloomington, IN: Zalo Publications, 1978.
- Stevens, Roger S. *Artistic Flute technique and study*. Hollywood: Highland Music Co., 1967.
- Tanzer, Stephen. *A Basic Guide to Fingerings for the Piccolo*. Bala Cynwyd, PA: Sopranino Press, 1990.