

How to get your flute practising back up after a Hiatus

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Question: It's been over a year since I was practising 2-4 hours a day, and now I have full time employment in another job field that leaves me only 1 to 1.5 hrs. a day for flute.

I haven't played in months, and really want to get back to it.

What would you recommend for getting back in shape on the flute after a hiatus?

Christine replies:

Q: How can I get back to practising after a year off while working a full time job?

I can remember one studio class in grad school where a student commented about not having enough time to practice with such a busy schedule. Alexa Still's answer to that comment was, "If you think you have no time to practice now, just wait until you are not in school anymore." How right she was! Since graduating with my degree two years ago, I have been living a double life as both a full time arts administrator by day, and a musician/teacher/career builder/professional job applicant by night.

[Jennifer Cluff's article](#) (re-printed below) on returning to the flute after a hiatus offers excellent suggestions for getting back to the instrument. I incorporated similar techniques into my practice after taking a hiatus of my own, and they are terrific! Getting my chops back into shape was the easy part. The challenge was finding the time and motivation to practice consistently while working a day job AND working to build my musical life (so that I would no longer have to work the day job :)).

Although everyone's situation and circumstances are unique, here are a few strategies that helped to keep my flute chops in shape while working a full time job:

1. Become a SUPERIOR time manager: Plan, Plan, Plan Look at your calendar, and schedule your daily practice sessions a week in advance, fitting in sessions where ever you have a block of time. When you lay out the calendar this way, you might be amazed at the amount of time you can find in a day or a week to practice. These pockets of time are not something you think about (or have time to think about) when you are stuck in the day-to-day grind of a full-time job.

In addition to scheduling your sessions, maximize the time you do have by thinking about your goals for the year, the month, and the week, and then plan each of your individual practice sessions in preparation of these goals. (The glories of the practice notebook, and great suggestions for effective routines, have been discussed on this list a lot in the recent past if you need specific plans). Be sure that you are focused on the task, and listening with great attention during every moment you do have to practice. A well developed plan of action, focused attention, and critical ears will really go a long way in helping you to use your time efficiently with great result. Remember the adage, "Quality over Quantity." It's a cliché for a reason- it works.

When I first started working the day job, I could only muster 1-1.5 hours a day of sporadic practice. I would leave work exhausted and it was difficult to go home and pick up the flute. Focus? Hal Right. After I started scheduling practice sessions in advance each week, I managed

to regularly squeeze in 2.5 hours a day. The lunch hour became my Warm Up (Focus is on tone, pitch and slow melodies for phrasing, colour, and vibrato; also finger technique such as scales, arpeggios, exercises for facility etc). When the work-day finished at 5:00, I would find an empty room at work, and practice for 90 minutes BEFORE leaving to go home. (Focus is on upcoming repertoire for concerts, gigs etc).

The temptations of the couch, a good book, and TV after 8 hours of paper pushing were too hard to pass up. Adding the practice session immediately after work while I was still in "work mode" was the trick for me. If I had concerts coming up and needed more time (or I had an evening of private teaching, gigs etc), I would go into work early and tack the time onto the beginning of the work-day.

2. Strive to be consistent in your practicing. Make yourself play/practice even when you do not think you have enough time to do it. Practicing 4+ hours a day, on a regular schedule is a luxury, and one that is easy to take for granted while in school. There are days when scheduling makes it impossible to practice more than an hour. On those days, divide the time you do have into three parts, focusing on fundamentals such as tone and technique, and spots in the repertoire you are working on that need serious attention. If you consistently work on the fundamentals of tone and technique, to build and maintain your chops, you will be in a much better position to approach the repertoire when you finally do have the time to work on it.

Make yourself play/practice even when you do not have the motivation to do it. The motivation to play and focus can be difficult to muster after spending 8 hours at work, especially if that work is in an unrelated field- it's draining. It is easy to get into the rut of not playing simply because it is sometimes easier to do that than to pick up the instrument and hear yourself sound less than your prime! Summon the discipline you developed in school, and do it anyway. Strive to make yourself practice through the lag in motivation, and find ways that inspire you to want play. (Although they are not music related, sports movies like the first "Rocky" movie or "Hoosiers" worked for me. After Rocky's last fight, I am always inspired to play. Corny, but true! Once again, find what works for you. It does not have to be related to music.). The more regularly you can get yourself to play, the quicker your chops will return, and the better you will feel about playing. It will snow ball until you are back in shape, and begin to look forward to playing/practicing again.

3. Reconsider your thinking & expectations about practicing and playing (not your standards). After finishing school, facing "real world" issues, like paying the bills, while also working to pursue the dream of a full time career in music (whatever that may be) is challenging. Part of being successful at making this happen (imho), means taking the time to reconsider the way you view practicing/playing in general. This process is different for different people, and you really have to come to it on your own terms. Ultimately, what worked for me was setting the goal (at the start) of playing the flute more days than I didn't. This is a sharp departure from the frame of mind we have while in school where one must practice every day, or else...The reality out of school is that there will be days when you just cannot make time because of other commitments (day job, music jobs, life, family, even fatigue), and that is (insert gasp-this was my "ah ha" moment)...really okay.

You will eventually come to a place where you will adjust to your work schedule, and be able to have a regular practice routine, practicing at a frequency that makes you comfortable...and sounding good. In the meantime, while you strive to follow the dream (and pay the bills), work to play the flute more days than you don't (increasing the number of days and duration of practice gradually), be disciplined about making every minute you have to practice productive (many, many articles, postings, books and websites on this topic are available, just google), and look for ways to let "real life" inspire you to play every day. Coming from the other side of the tunnel, I can tell you it works...

My 2.5 cents worth,

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Jen Cluff replies:

(this article can also be found here: <http://www.jennifercluff.com/blog/2008/06/how-to-get-back-into-flute-after-haitus.html>)

Dear Hiatus Flutists,

I always use Moyse's "De La Sonorite" and focus on getting back "my lip" with the low register whole note crescendo diminuendo exercises. Since the low register responds more readily to lip changes, it gives you quicker feedback on precise embouchure positions. You also might want to read Moyse's "How I stayed in Shape" if you can interlibrary-loan a copy, or want to use your newfound income to purchase a copy. It cheers you up, no end.

I also got fabulous tips from reading the works of those who'd studied with Geoffrey Gilbert and Rampal in the two books "The Gilbert Legacy" (by Floyd) and "Bel Canto Flute: The Rampal School" (by Cohen).

There are also great tips in "The Simple Flute from A to Z" (by Debost).

But by far the best book for ease, poise and simplicity of getting your skills back in a short time, has got to be "The Physical Flute" by Fiona Wilkinson. That book is worth ordering the minute you read the title. :-> All these books are readily available, or check www.fluteworld.com

Additionally, there are some erudite, pithy practising articles on the net that may be worthwhile reading over. (more links below)

Firstly, there's a page from the Brooke's Flute Method book that was written by James Pappoutsakis. It's sheer brilliance. See a copy here: James Pappoutsakis advice on daily practise. <http://www.jennifercluff.com/pappoutsakis.pdf>

What I like about the above page is that it covers several important points:

1. Listen to your overall playing, and spot any weaknesses that you want to improve. This is important because good practise skills really rely on HEARING your flute playing in all its details. When you hear a problem (especially when you're rusty or out of practise) make a note of it, and design an exercise that will make an improvement.

When you're short of time, a short exercise of ten minutes or so can make a difference if done for a week or two everyday.

2. Begin to play in a "natural manner without using force or exaggeration. Exercises should be simple so that you can focus on listening to one skill at a time.

This is tremendous advice. I believe that most discouragement when your flute playing is rusty comes from overwhelming yourself with just how many things sound wrong.

Instead, allow your body to adjust to the skills by starting out in a mellow and unforced manner.

I find that simple Irish melodies (or other ethnic folk tunes) give a great deal of pleasure without forcing the technique.

Some great celtic tunes or beautiful simple melodies are easy to play mezzo piano-to mezzo forte, and with long legato lines.

These allow your lips and tone to develop gradually from the low and middle registers without strain and fatigue while enchanting you and keeping you in the mood to practise further.

See suggested Celtic music here. <http://www.jennifercluff.com/celtic.htm>

3. Start with easy longtones in low and middle register without too great a change in dynamics.

Only gradually extend the range over several weeks, never playing high register when tired. Release tension in jaw especially when coming back to the flute after a hiatus. De La Sonorite by Marcel Moyse is the best overall book for this kind of work. He does indeed remind you to release jaw and embouchure tensions.

4. Once your tone has started to become centered and reliable, practise easy leaps from a single note to every other chromatic note. This is also in Moyse's Sonorite book, but start small. Keep the range of leaping quite close at first.

Note: "The Physical Flute" by Fiona Wilkinson has EXCELLENT exercises for the returning flutist. Find this book at Fluteworld or order it using Interlibrary Loan.

She not only has brilliantly thought out note-leaping exercises for flexibility, she also has great melodious warmups that have all the pointers spelled out alongside, such as remembering to release tension in the body, and embouchure.

5. Tonguing can be practised on repeated notes to focus on the neatness and clarity of the tongue stroke.

At first, I suggest all slurred playing of a short passage. Then tongue repeated notes to hear the clarity of the tongue (choose one or more notes from the passage, and repeat-tongue it until the tongue sounds clear and feels easy and simple in motion.)

Then listen to the various types of tonguing patterns suggested in the Pappoutsakis: Portamento, Accented, Staccato.

Double and triple tonguing can be done slowly and neatly (listening carefully to the ease of the tongue) on chromatic scales.

6. Fingers: As Pappoutsakis states: The objective of fingering is even effortless rather than extreme speed.

LET THE ENTIRE ARM FROM THE SHOULDERS DOWN TO THE FINGERS BE RELAXED.

I think this is very important. The tendons that operate the finger movements on the flute extend all the way to the elbow and beyond.

If you use an easy straightened and relaxed wrist you can feel the tendons slide in the forearm.

Easy sliding tendons are super important to fast finger action.

Cocking wrists back to choke off tendons in the wrist makes too much work for the finger-movements and can lead to injury.

Pappoutsakis uses the the five-note exercises (123454321) at a slow speed for evenness and then doubles the tempo immediately using the identical relaxed finger and arm sensations.

7. Pappoutsakis uses slurred intervals such as whole-tones and half-tones on his handout, to strengthen weak finger combinations. (Ex: Ab to G and then Ab to Gb)

These combinations are written out brilliantly in "The Flutist's Vade Mecum" by Walfrid Kujala, along with great finger-stabilizing fingering patterns.)

I enjoy working out tricky combination fingerings by doing super slow tremelos (A to F for example, played in slow half-notes, then easily in eighth notes) while sensing the balance of the flute in the hands.

8. Trills done in this manner, slowly, and evenly, with particular observation of the curved, light finger, are also a good starting point for balancing the hands, and being aware of the ease of the tendons in the arms, wrist and hand.

I like to trill very delicately without excessive pressure, and thinking "lift" everytime the finger rises. If you sense closely that you can allow the spring that lifts the keys to lift the key, and just release each finger to allow the key to be lifted for you, you get rid of tensions very quickly.

9. Controlling the air-stream. Pappoutsakis suggests sustaining notes at different dynamic levels without agitation or vibrato.

The idea is to produce very STEADY blowing that is not hard or forceful to produce.

A steady mezzo-piano at first, followed by gradual addition of dynamics. Again, you can use simple melodies to explore this as you go along.

Moyse's "Tone Development Through Interpretation" has many melodies from Opera grouped by such categories as:

- a) Low register piano and pianissimo
 - b) Middle register soft playing
 - c) high register forte playing
 - d) mixed dynamics low and middle register
- etc. etc.

He also suggests slow scales so that you can listen to the note changes and be sure that they are smooth with no bumps or bulges. Stay in the low and middle registers for several weeks before working on the refinement of the high register.

It takes several months, usually, to get back the embouchure poise to play with a refined sound in the highest register.

10. Pappoutsakis talks about: Intonation can be practised by playing chords and intervals and anticipating the sound of the next pitch before you play it.

I also use "The Tuning CD" (www.thetuningcd.com) for chords, arpeggios, etudes, pieces and scales. This allows me to hear the beats (or the beatlessness) of each pitch against the open-fifth drone on the tuning CD, and also makes practising sound far more interesting.

Chords and scales sound GORGEOUS with the open-fifths droning in the background and make you want to keep practising.

Melodies and excerpts also sound more beautiful when tuned against the CD.

Playing feels more effortless. It's a wonderful tool.

The use of "The Tuning CD" simultaneously corrects everything from air-speed to embouchure changes to intonation when creating dynamic contours.

It's fabulous in all respects!

Some additional more modern pointers to add:

11. Use a recording device to listen back to your playing when you are taking your breaks every 20-30 minutes. This cuts down on wasted time.

You can hear clearly exactly what you need to work on and can make notes while listening. Then, the next day, you can develop short and easy exercises that gradually improve the problems you spotted in the recording.

Note: Many musicians are afraid to listen to themselves on a recording and so avoid it.

This is lunacy; you will improve FAR FAR faster if you can pin-point the exact problem immediately and avoid repeating that problem day after day.

Some musicians also think the listening back time will reduce the amount of time they have to practise. This is also lunacy, since listening back and jotting a note down may add 10 minutes, but it will save you hours and hours of repeating that same mistake for days and weeks, and then spending MONTHS un-doing the problem, later, when it's become habitual.

(examples: Poor tone, tight lips, throat noises, nanny-goat vibrato, sloppy tonguing, un-even fingerings, laboured arpeggios etc.)

12. Set up some reading rehearsals with fellow musicians: woodwind quartet with flute; guitar and flute; flute trios/quartets/duets etc.

Having the goal of "playing with others on Sundays" or playing with others once a month will help you to keep your focus and drive after a hard day working in another field.

We all need REAL MUSIC to look forward to in order to keep our spirits up when practising.

If there are no other musicians, create a flute duo using a recording machine and a metronome and all your old duets (or some new ones; Kuhlau has writtn TONS!)

The recording of the Flute 2 part can be re-recorded and perfected, and will then be there again tomorrow for a lovely chamber music sound as you play through old and new duets each day.

13. Have your flute cleaned, oiled and adjusted by a reputable technician so you aren't fighting pad leaks, or a leaking cork, and especially to give the mechanism the oil it needs to avoid mechanical wear during play.

14. Stretch out and keep muscles limber. Try and find a time of day when your body isn't over-tired (lunch breaks are good if you can find a good acoustic space nearby your work.)

You will especially want to keep neck, jaw, shoulders and chest free from tension. Yoga stretches, basic stretches, or musician's stretches in Janet Horvath's book "Playing Less Hurt" are good.

15. Don't beat yourself up. It can take up to a year to regain your skills. Allow yourself this time, and don't demand so much of your body that you end up with tension.

Stay with the middle ground of easy, beautiful, slow playing, with light and even fingers and slowly expand outward from there.

Stay optimistic, make beautiful sounds, explore lyrical pieces. All these things will allow the fastest possible re-development of your skills.

16. Listen to and watch expert flutists. If you witness effortless mastery you will be much more able to reproduce it.

Don't live in a flute vacuum. There are many inspiring flute videos here:

http://ca.youtube.com/profile_favorites?user=fluteloophost

You can also (with your new job) afford new music and new flute CDs. Feel free to shop for those items that peak your interest. I have some good CDs for listening in the car to and from work listed here: Desert Island Flute CDs: <http://www.jennifercluff.com/desert.htm>

17. And finally, treat yourself to some inspiring reading about the flute.

A full list of great flute books (and "how to practise" books) are listed here:

<http://www.jennifercluff.com/reading.htm>

For flutists getting back to the flute after a hiatus who are at the Novice or Intermediate level only, there are several other online practise pointer articles you may be interested in:

How to get back to the flute after a hiatus (for novice/intermediate players)

<http://www.jennifercluff.com/wanting.htm#hiatus>

How to develop a good practise routine for flute: <http://www.jennifercluff.com/practice.htm>

Pointers from Rampal's teaching: Using Time Effectively for Flute Study by Starr:

<http://www2.inow.com/~starr/USINGT~1.HTM>

How to Practise by Leonard Garrison: <http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~leonardg/practice1.html>

Thoughts on Practising: <http://www.public.asu.edu/~schuring/Oboe/practice.html>

(change "oboe" to "flute")

There is also a wonderful book called: "Conditioning Training - for The Flutist's Embouchure" by Werner Richter, which is SUPER once you start to get back your tone and overall flute skills. It is also available through Fluteworld.

Happy practising and be sure and leave a comment at my blog if you have other suggestions of good materials for this use. Go to:

<http://www.jennifercluff.com/blog/2008/06/how-to-get-back-into-flute-after-haitus.html>

Best,

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www.jennifercluff.com