

Feeling Awareness in the Body

Herbert Whone's ideas from The Simplicity of Playing the Violin

In 1972 a rather magnificent little book came out by violinist Herbert Whone called "The Simplicity of Playing the Violin". The advice in this violin book applies extremely well to flutists. Here is an extract from the first chapter paraphrased by Jen Cluff to suit flutists. To buy the original out-of-print book for \$25, contact Adam Whone, through his website: <http://www.adamwhone.co.uk/>

Paraphrased by Jen Cluff for Flutists ~ March 2007

"Chapter One: The physical freedom upon which a healthy technique is based is not necessarily easy to acquire. The human body is frequently taken for granted and real *feeling awareness* of it is seldom experienced. By feeling awareness I mean the ability of the body to sense its own existence ---for the body to become conscious of itself. It is not sufficient to talk of being "more aware" of the body because this can suggest simply observing it from the outside. We are referring to the possibility of feeling it from *within*. The difficulty arises because a human being generally spends his or her life in a state of identification with the external world, which can dull sensitivity at all levels of being. On one level consciousness itself is limited. (Note: In his book, "Strangers to Ourselves," Timothy Wilson of the University of Virginia notes that the brain can absorb about 11 million pieces of information a second, of which it can process merely 40 of that eleven million consciously. The unconscious brain handles the rest. This is why humans are so often limited in their conscious awareness. Whone offers advice on how to expand the consciousness to include the whole body when playing an instrument.)

Whone continues:

A human being is aware as an animal, but not aware that he is aware. This is a reflexive capacity that differentiates human from an animal: and on the level that concerns us in this chapter, a person can use his body but in such a mechanical way that he or she scarcely knows that it exists. It would be true to say, in fact, that when it is not suffering pain, the body is more often than not blind to itself. It is because of this blindness that tensions creep into the muscles and joints of a person's body during their life, interfering with the natural freedom of movement. To recover this freedom should be the first aim of all students of the flute. This is because there is no activity that requires more sensitivity of control, more speed of action and reaction, or more freedom of minute changes in lungs, lips, arms, fingers and body than the activity of performing music. To do this may take a considerable amount of time and training. (Note from J. Cluff: Often the most successful musicians have discovered this freedom of feeling awareness only after years of practice, trial, error, and even through recovery from injury).

It is surprising how reluctant a music student can be to accept that there is anything wrong with their body, and how difficult it can be to persuade them to spend time on what may seem to the student to be an unimportant matter. He or she may be quite convinced, for example, that their arms and hands are relaxed, and yet it may take considerable force for the teacher to press upon a student's arms to demonstrate how to lower them, while the student is busy playing the instrument.

Arm tension, raised elbows or shoulders can severely inhibit the rapid movement of the fingers, and the delicate balancing of the flute between its few holding points during play. The teacher, however, can see this tension and by putting their hand on the student's forearms, can feel the tension, and indicate to the student the moment when it begins to arise. Tension in the knees, hips, torso, chest or shoulders can also greatly inhibit breathing and full resonance of the tone. The teacher can say "relax" during the lessons, but the student may not carry this idea forward in their practising. These lessons where one-on-one observation is used can provide instances that can show a student the extent to which muscular contraction have limited their playing, finger movements, breathing ability, tone, and resonance. In some cases, early avoidance of muscular contraction can help avoid the kind of problems that can lead to future hand and arm pain, and other musician's injuries.

Contracted muscles are the musician's chief enemy. It is, as the word "contraction" suggests, contra-action, against action, and to realise this is the key to control in the body. In saying this, however, we have to be careful to understand that contraction is a relative term: for playing to be possible, or even for an arm to be held out from the body, some degree of contraction or tension is necessary. But this is minimal, and does not overstep the bounds of economic necessity. The contraction referred to as an enemy is in excess of what is necessary, and is a hindrance to action.

But it is not easy for a student to know if he or she has succeeded in reaching that point of minimal tension which allows them the greatest possible freedom of movement, because, as we have said, s/he may have little ability to sense their own body. If this is felt to be the case, there are a number of ways in which the student may be helped, but the following two are perhaps the most efficacious.

In the first, the student may sit quietly without external distraction (preferably with eyes closed) and, eliminating the normal thinking process, try to isolate in sensation the different parts of the body. It is a help initially to gently move or touch a specific part so as to locate it, but the aim is to become aware of the actual life movement within, say, a finger or an elbow. This sensing of life within the body is the "feeling awareness" of the title of this chapter. Its inherent difficulty is that it cannot be described----only experienced. But it must be sought, because without it contraction cannot even be identified, let alone relaxed.

In the second, the student may make him/herself increasingly aware of what contraction is --- the method of knowing a thing by its opposite. Either arm is held out in its approximate position for playing and muscles tightened until they are rigid. This produces an immobility of the arm. The tension is then released and an attempt is made to feel the opposite state of lightness. As the tension is released the student will notice that there is a gradual increase in mobility until the arm finally feels able to move freely and easily in any direction. (for

flutists, the movements are quite small but very fluid, in order to allow the fingers to move with the help of the long tendons in the forearms.) The return to the contracted state is then made immediately, and an alternation between the two states repeated so that the difference between them can be keenly registered.

For some, this exercise may be difficult and at first the extreme may not be fully reached, but by moving between one and the other, familiarity with the two extremes may be developed and their limits extended.

This exercise can be extended, by increasing sensitivity to the differing degrees of tension between the extremes. To do this it is useful to draw upon images of corresponding densities from the natural world. Maximum contraction, for instance, could be imagined as the density of Steel. Minimum contraction could be imagined as Air. And the states between these two extremes in descending order could be imagined as: Stone, Soil, Wood, Water, and Paper.

The middle degrees of this seven-fold scale would then correspond to the tension states that normally inhabit and inhibit the body during waking life and in the practise room. By becoming familiar with such states at the shoulder, elbows and wrists, it is possible to control, and ultimately transform them at will into the Air state. The Air state is our objective and cannot be stressed too much; it is only from this state that the fingers can be sensitively controlled at high speeds, or during complex cross-fingerings, and that the breath can be used fully and effectively. As we will see from later chapters the torso and arms of a flutist are only efficient in their movements when they move into action from a state of minimal tension, and can return to that state at will, and during rest periods.

The feeling awareness is then the basis for all control of the body and must be seen as the first stage in a player's training. It does not only apply to the arms and torso, though of course, in flute playing, those are of primary importance: in the act of playing, but all parts of the body interrelate. Any locking of the joints or muscles in one place is felt in the others. The lightness of air should extend to every limb and muscle in the body until it is felt as a totally flexible unit. The delicate interplay of stress and strain within the body is to do with stance and balance as well, as will be seen in chapter two.

Chapter Two: It is unfortunate that the learning of the flute is often begun in the seated position (in band classes in North America, for instance). When sitting, balance is restricted by the body being severed half-way down and a player often feels the need to rise and avail themselves of their whole body and lung power when they finally begin to develop a rich and well-rounded tone, and to sustain long musical phrases.

Even when standing, the problem of balance needs attention. Many players give the impression of suffering from some sort of muscular paralysis and there is an instability which in some cases is so pronounced, that a mere push on an arm can cause the body to lose

balance completely. For this to be possible, the joints and muscles of both arms must be so severely locked as to deny the possibility of movement. It is movement that is the key to balance and only through movement can such a tendency to overbalance be countered.

The pushing of an arm should have been absorbed in the arm by yielding at the shoulder and the elbow, and in the legs, by flexible movement at the joints which allows counterbalancing to take place. (this is a technique of defence well known in the martial arts.)

In all fields, in fact, stability lies in the movement and not in a deceptively secure-looking immobility. Upon this principle a juggler keeps his plates revolving on top of a stick, and a tight-rope walker keeps his balance. A child's spinning top, giving the illusion of stillness at the moment of its fastest motion, illustrates even more clearly that dynamic stability requires freedom of motion. (see exercises below pg. 4-5).

The equivalent movement that gives the flutist or musician their stability is an alternative transferring of the body's weight from one foot to the other. (Note: If you watch a James Galway video, or other top-class flutist perform, you will see them slowly shift their weight from one foot to the other over several minutes. Alternately, when practising this for yourself, you will feel a constant, minute re-balancing of the weight between the feet every few seconds that is not noticeable to the eye. In "The Physical Flute" by Wilkinson, she describes this as "keep the knees slightly bent, and balance between the feet as if standing up in a row-boat".)

This movement however sensitive it may be, is a condition of balance and depends entirely on the placing of the feet. An incorrect foot placement can destroy balance, such as when the feet are placed too close together or with toes facing forward toward the music stand. Both positions cause the body to overbalance by either being top-heavy, or by being over-twisted and uncomfortable at the shoulders in holding the flute to the side.

The feet can also upset balance by being turned in or out at too much of an angle, or placed too widely apart. Even one tight knee joint, or one twisted ankle can cause an awkward tension that travels up the body.

The most efficient position of the feet is about a foot apart (depending on the height and weight of the player), and with toes angled very, very slightly outward. This allows the freest and most natural alternation of the weight to take place from foot to foot.

(Note: James Galway has suggested that the right foot is back, left foot forward, and the weight rests primarily on the back foot.)

An erect spine is also an important factor in balance. Bending forward from the waist to peer at the music stand overbalances the body and freedom of movement and overall balance is inhibited. But the idea of erect spine does not imply rigidity. The spine must be utterly flexible throughout its entire length. It has its own natural way of carrying the weight of the body, and all that is asked is that this should be allowed to happen without strain. Simple exercises freeing any contraction in the spine can help. A student can experiment with spine twists and bends (Yoga movements), bending forward as though bowing (as in martial arts; forehead slowly descends towards knees, and the body hangs loosely), or leaning over and passing an imaginary heavy bucket from hand to hand to free the hips and feel the balance of the body's weight transfer through the hips.

Another area to consider is the balance of the head on the "Atlas Bone" on the top of the spine (see Alexander Technique). If at the same time as maintaining flexibility in the erect spine, the head is slightly raised until its actual point of balance between the ears is sensed, the body can be released of much of its weight and a perfect sense of balance be achieved.

All these exercises are done without the flute, of course. Then, when the flute is held, this ideal should be approximated as closely as possible." [end Whone paraphrase]

Notes added by Jennifer Cluff:

For Pianists: Many young pianists transfer their "weight downward on the keys" piano teaching ideas to the keys of the flute. A well-repaired flute, with no pad leaks does not need pressure on each key to sound the note. The touch on the flute keys should be as light as a butterfly's wing.

For Dancers: Many young dancers have been taught to hold their stomachs in, and to stand very still and erect, with contracted knees and legs, when they are not actually dancing. This looks great in a tableau, but is totally in conflict with fluid music making. A musician in the act of playing his/her instrument does not necessarily appear "aesthetically pleasing" as does a dancer in a tableau. A musician, especially a flutist, looks like a very relaxed air-bellows, producing a huge amount of air with a well-rounded abdomen (extended stomach) on every intake of air. The spine is erect and the head well-balanced, but the body itself is fluid and in constant minute-motion.

For Flutists with Tight Embouchures: There are several videos online that address the release of the embouchure to counteract accidental self-training that may have developed over the years where flute students play with excessive tension in the lips. See videos on Embouchure Flexibility at <http://www.jennifercluff.com/blog/2007/02/new-video-on-embouchure-flexibility.html> to begin to undo this tension. Check back to my blog for future flute videos on this topic.

A simple exercise: If you wish to relieve tension in the neck, you can make tiny, almost invisibly small figure "8" motions with the tip of your nose. This undoes tension in the neck. I've used this exercise with all body parts, and all muscles, and even the flute itself, and found that it's a reliable way of un-doing muscular tension. Make the figure 8s smaller and smaller, and looser and freer with every figure 8 you do. Make the figure 8s in all directions with all parts of your body, a new one every time you sense tension.

This information will be included in my new flute book.

(future publication dates to be announced.)

See more flute and posture articles at:

www.jennifercluff.com