Learning to Play the Native American Flute

When compared with most other musical instruments, playing the Native American flute is easy – and both teaching and learning should be a lot of fun. Remember – *There are no wrong notes!*

**Parts of the Flute**

Here is some basic terminology and parts of the Native American Flute (NAF):

- The mouthpiece and blowhole
- The slow air chamber, or SAC
- The flue or air channel, which is covered by the block, bird, or the fetish
- The sounding edge, cutting edge, or fipple, that creates the sine wave that we hear as sound
- The true sound hole leading to the sound chamber
- The finger holes which interrupt the sine wave to create the individual notes
- The tuning holes (if present) that serve to bring the flute into key – This can also be accomplished by cutting the flute off at that point – These may also be called the directional holes.

When you blow into the Blowhole; air enters and fills the Slow Air Chamber. That air is forced up the Flue, where the Block directs the air to the Sound Edge where the air is split. This starts a vibration or sine wave that we perceive as sound.

The sine wave is restricted by the diameter and length of the Sound Chamber (Bore). The sine wave is interrupted at pre determined locations as the fingers are lifted on the various Finger Holes, which creates the individual notes of the scale we are playing.
Care of the Flute

You should keep all finished wood, particularly wooden musical instruments, out of the direct sunlight. Direct sunlight coming through the house or car window can result in rapid and unequal expansion and contraction of both the wood and the finish on it, and cause cracks to develop in both wood and finish. Cracks in the finish provide additional points of entry for moisture, which causes more expansion and contraction. Also the ultra violet rays in un-filtered sunlight will cause deterioration of most surface finishes.

Heat and moisture (temperature and humidity) also cause rapid expansion of the wood, and the finish. Human salvia is quite acidic, and will cause a breakdown of most surface finishes. For this reason we suggest that you simply place the end of your flute against your lips when playing, rather than putting it in your mouth - The surface finish will last longer.

However the surface finish will eventually wear off of the mouth piece and over the finger holes of your flute. You may notice the wood grain rising on the mouth piece in particular. You can fix this by buffing the area with a little bit of #0000 steel wool, followed by an application of good quality wax formulated for use on wood. Make sure the product you select is safe to put in your mouth. Products using bees wax are suggested. Oils are not suggested, as they never completely dry and serve to attract dust and grit to the surface of your flute.

Remember also that there is both moisture and heat in our breath. This may become condensed in the slow air chamber and flue, sometimes to the extent that the moisture affects the sound of the flute. This is called “wetting out” and may be cured in many cases by pulling the block back to expose the hole leading from the slow air chamber, turning the flute upside down, and blowing sharply. This should remove enough moisture from the slow air chamber so that you are able to continue playing. Clearing and drying the slow air chamber is also a good practice to follow whenever putting the flute away after playing.

Try to avoid mechanical damage to the flute. Flutes should be transported in flute bags and inside padded cases where possible. Try not to drop them on hard floors or pavement. Our dogs like our flutes because they smell like us, and many dogs are used to playing with sticks - So don’t leave your flute where the dog might reach it. Keep your flute out of closing doors and don’t use your flute for disciplining large animals or teenagers.

Your flute is a fairly delicate instrument that requires at least some degree of care in transportation, handling, playing and storage. Given the care outlined above, there is no reason that your Native American style flute can’t be used and enjoyed indefinitely. If disaster does strike, however, do take your damaged flute to a reputable flute maker for evaluation and possible repair - You would be amazed at what can be fixed.
5 and 6 Hole Flutes - Scales
The word “pentatonic” means “5 tones or notes” – Essentially a 5 note scale. The reason that most flute makers put the 6th hole in the flute is to facilitate the playing of different scales on the instrument. It is possible to play at least 10 different scales on this simple instrument.

This first lesson will concentrate on just the pentatonic minor scale. This scale is played with the third hole from the top always covered. If you have trouble keeping this hole covered you might want to use a piece of masking tape or a leather strap while learning to play.

Posture and Breathing
It is important for you to realize that good posture, keeping the upper body erect and the shoulders back, allows for the full expansion of the lungs and chest for the most efficient intake and release of air. So it is important that you sit upright or stand with good posture, and take several normal breaths of air through the mouth.

Notice how your abdomen pokes out a little with your breath? This is actually the movement of your diaphragm. The diaphragm is a web of muscle that separates the chest cavity from the abdominal cavity. It is the second strongest muscle in the body, and is responsible for filling and emptying the lungs of air. It is an involuntary muscle and you can’t consciously control the action, but with just a little practice you can learn to use the movement to control the flow of air when playing the flute.

Using your good posture and keeping your shoulders relaxed, breathe in through the mouth while mentally counting to four at a steady pace – 1, 2, 3, 4.

Now exhale at the same pace – 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Now inhale again at the same steady pace – 1, 2, 3, 4 – and exhale using a hissing sound through the lips to the count of eight – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.

Repeat the exercise exhaling to the count of 10, and again to the count of 12. This teaches you how to control your breathing and meter the air through the lips in a constant stream to power the flute.

Placement of the Flute against the Lips – The Embouchure
“Embouchure” is a French word that originally referred to the mouth of a river. In flute playing it means the position and use of the lips to direct the air from the mouth to the instrument to produce sound. With the Native American flute the work is mostly done for us by the arrangement of the slow air chamber, the block and flue, and the design of the cutting edge/fipple. The blowing edge of the flute does not have to be fully enclosed by the lips like a straw – Rather I want you to simply rest the flute against the bottom lip and use the top lip to form a seal. This method makes it easy to take in air from the corners of the mouth without moving the flute from its position on the lower lip.
Placement of the Hands
There is no right/wrong way to position hands on the flute, however it is more common for the first 3 fingers of the left hand to cover the top 3 holes, and the first three fingers of the right hand to cover the bottom three holes. It is best to use the pads of the fingers (the flat, meaty part on the bottom of the finger tip) to cover the holes, rather than the very tips of the fingers. Using the finger pads will help cover the holes better and give a clearer sound. Also you will not have to press as hard, causing less finger fatigue. Try holding the flute in the left hand only. Find the balance point where the 3 fingers on the top and the thumb on the bottom control the direction and movement of the flute. Once you have found this balance point practice bringing the flute to your lips with it balanced in by your left hand only. Then place the first three fingers and thumb of the right hand in the proper position.

Playing the First Notes
Begin by using only the left hand, the first three fingers covering the top three holes. Place the flute properly against the lips, and exhale a single breath to the count of 4 without moving any fingers. Repeat this exercise as necessary until it is going smoothly. Next start lifting and replacing fingers 2 and 1 – First individually and then together. This gets you used to leaving finger 3 in place, and will even allow you to play simple three note tunes.

Add the Second Hand
Once you are comfortable with playing the top three notes, place the first three fingers of the right hand on the bottom three holes. Repeat the exercises above using only the right hand (be sure to keep those top holes covered with the left fingers). Start by lifting and replacing two fingers at once, then three fingers at once. Try some simple 3 note tunes while doing this exercise.

Put it together – Play the Scale
Next try the full pentatonic scale, up you go, and down you go. That’s it - you have played the minor pentatonic scale!

The P-4 hole (the hole we have kept covered by the third finger of the left hand) is the note used for accent, or to play a number of alternative scales – It is not part of the pentatonic minor scale and we are not really going to address it at this time.

At this time I want you to divide into groups of twos, facing each other to help you make individual corrections as practice continues. Just take turns going through the scale and go ahead a try some other changes to the scale and create your own little tune. The 2nd person will watch your fingers and assist if you are having a problem covering the holes or with your breathing. Again, take some of this time to experiment with simple tunes. Please remember that this flute, and the pentatonic scale, is really made for improvising your own tunes. Take advantage of this and experiment!
Accents

Accents are little embellishments that you may use to add character or interest to your music. There are a number of these, but we will only be talking about 3 today:

**Slurring:** This is accomplished by slowly raising or dropping a finger over a hole while blowing the flute to transition to the next highest or next lowest note.

**Tonguing:** To obtain a crisper beginning to a note use a technique known as “tonguing”. This is accomplished by saying “ta” or “da” or “do” into the flute. The tongue acts as a valve that releases a sharp burst of air into the flute. Done more explosively on some notes it may produce an overblow (jump in tone to the second octave) that is known as “chirping”.

**The Rolled R:** Also known as the “motor boat sound” this is accomplished by rapidly fluttering the tongue against the roof of the mouth, resulting in a “rrrrrrrrrrr” sound. This may be used on single notes, or on rising or falling series of notes to produce special effects.

Again, I would like you to pair up by twos and practice these three accents.

The First Song

The following page contains one interpretation of the Cherokee Morning Song, and it is a good tune to start with. It demonstrates most of the above lessons, and is simple enough to learn in a fairly short period of time. Remember with NAF playing there are NEVER any “wrong notes”. This is the one instrument that you can use to improvise and add embellishments to any tune. You should feel free to experiment with your own renditions and versions of this first song. This will help set the stage for your continued enjoyment of this wonderful instrument.
Cherokee Morning Song

"Repeat to each of the four directions."

Composition Note: This melody is commonly sung in mode 5 pentatonic which is problematic when played upon a mode 1 pentatonic flute. But by changing one note, the second "ho" in the lyrics, the melody is easily fits the basic scale of these flutes.
The Harmony Wheel shows you which keys of flute sound well together when played as an accompaniment to each other in duets or when jamming with other flute players.

References

The Native American Flute: Understanding the Gift by John Vames
Molly Moon Arts & Publishing, Scottsdale, AZ

Probably the best “how to” book for learning how to play; this book features a CD with musical tracks that illustrate the individual lessons.

Flute Tree:  http://www.flutetree.com/
Free learning material from history, Lore, Songs & Scales. My key source.

Flutopedia:  http://www.flutopedia.com/
Informative site with some helpful information

Washington Flute Circle:  http://www.waflutecircle.com/ Lists information on locations of community flute circles that are participants in Washington Flute Circle 501c3 non profit Group. The Washington Flute Circle organizes and presents Flute Quest, www.flutequest.com promoting the NAF Flute and other indigenous musical instruments.