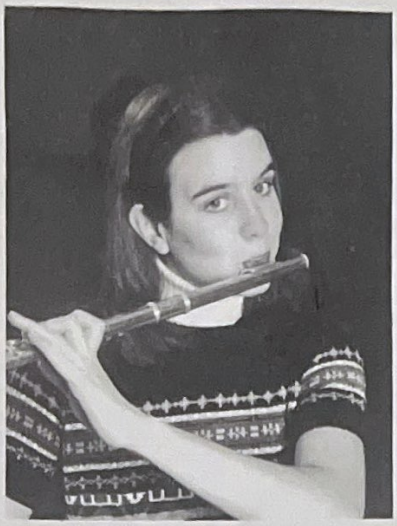
Flute Talk

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Teaching Self-Awareness

BY KATHLEEN GOLL-WILSON

With a bachelor's degree in flute performance from Wichita State University and a master's degree in composition from California Institute of the Arts, Ellen Burr is a successful teacher and freelance performer. "I began playing the flute when I was 10 to get out of a fifth grade social studies class, but I soon discovered that music, and especially the flute, gave me the voice for which I had been searching." She progressed quickly and by the 9th grade the band director asked who was her teacher. "I looked at him with a dumb-founded expression and told him, 'Why you are!' He suggested studying privately with Jim Hamilton, principal flute in the Kansas City Philharmonic, who agreed to teach me."

When Burr became section leader of the high school band, a girl from a lower band asked for help on the audition repertoire. "After the lesson she offered me money, which surprised me. My response was that because this was the first lesson that I had taught, she shouldn't pay me unless she came back again. My father peered around the corner and encouraged me to teach more because I had a knack for it. I have given lessons ever since and now have 35 students from ages 6 to 65." Burr has expanded her teaching through leading master classes, organizing concerts for students, and developing a teaching apprentice program for star pupils. Many of her students have won competitions and scholarships and have gone on to study with Julius Baker, Michel Debost, Jeffrey Khaner, and Jeanne Baxtresser.

Each year Burr donates some of her time to help the director at the local junior high start new flutists correctly. "I think every private teacher should help the school music program, because new players often learn incorrect habits that take a long time to break." In time her efforts are rewarded when some of the beginners later study with her.

"I try to teach an understanding of music as well as flute playing so students will make informed choices about interpretation. Students should play along with popular recordings and gradually begin to improvise." Burr has developed mnemonic devices, drawings, and exercises to remember key signatures, scales, flats, sharps, and third-register fingerings. She stresses playing in all dynamic levels to develop embouchure control.

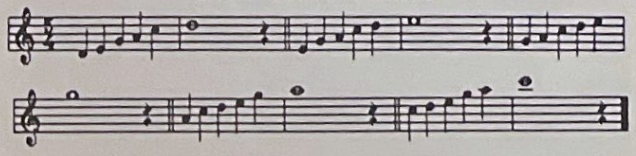
Burr views improvisation as spontaneous composition, but many players "expect to begin at the level of Charlie Parker, which is as naive as hoping to play Ibert's *Concerto for Flute* after one lesson. Learning to improvise takes time but becomes easier with each step. Musicians should not evaluate or judge what they improvise as they play because criticism preoccupies the player with the past. Improvisation happens in the present, and the goal is to focus on the progression."

One technique that Burr uses with her students involves recording some improvisations and then listening to and analyzing them, "especially the sections that are not as interesting or uninspired, but I tell students to get away from note-by-note assessments, which are self-destructive. If an internal voice says something doesn't fit, breathe here, or that is too much of the same thing, the player loses concentration, while the job is to weave time, notes, rhythm, accents, and dynamics as yarn."

Burr contends that once the internal critic is silenced, improvisation becomes spontaneous, especially if it is separated into the four elements of notes, rhythm, patterns, and expression. "The range of the flute is from low B to C4, which means 43 notes are at the flutist's disposal. A dissonant pitch can be resolved up or down one-half step, but a truly gutsy player will repeat a dissonant note and its resolution if it occurs only once so it doesn't seem like a mistake. By repeating and emphasizing it, the note fits into the overall scheme."

Bebop is one of the most difficult improvisation styles because it entails knowing what scale to play over which underlying rapid chord changes. "Students have to learn the ten different tonalities by playing major and three forms of the minor scales, five additional modes, and the blues scale. Begin with a C major scale but stop on B, the seventh step, which leaves the sound hanging and wanting to resolve to the tonic to complete the scale. By contrast, the pentatonic scale has no tonal center:

D Pentatonic Scale

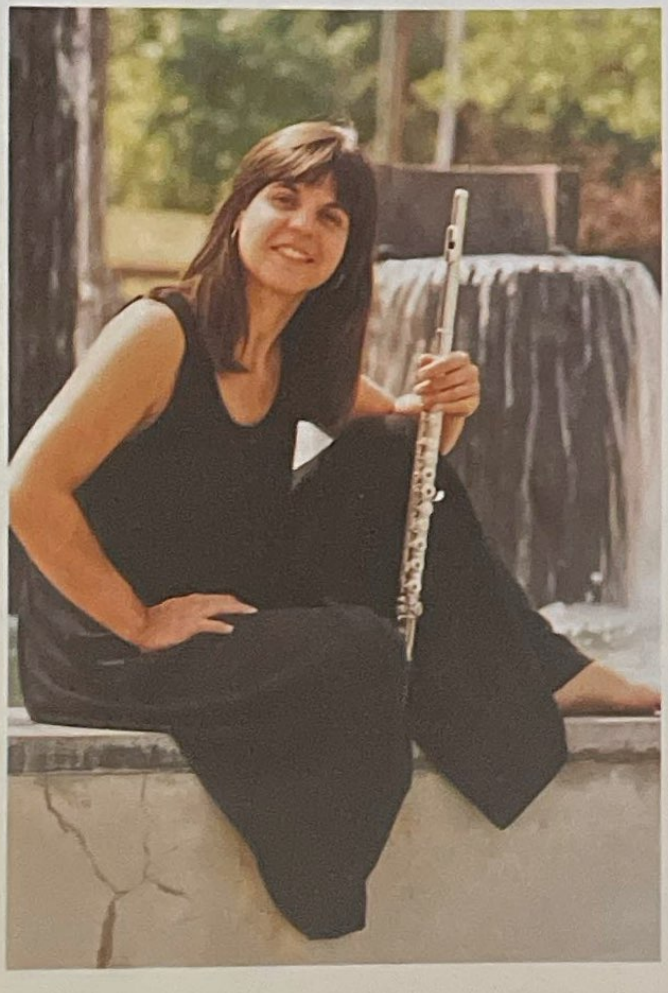


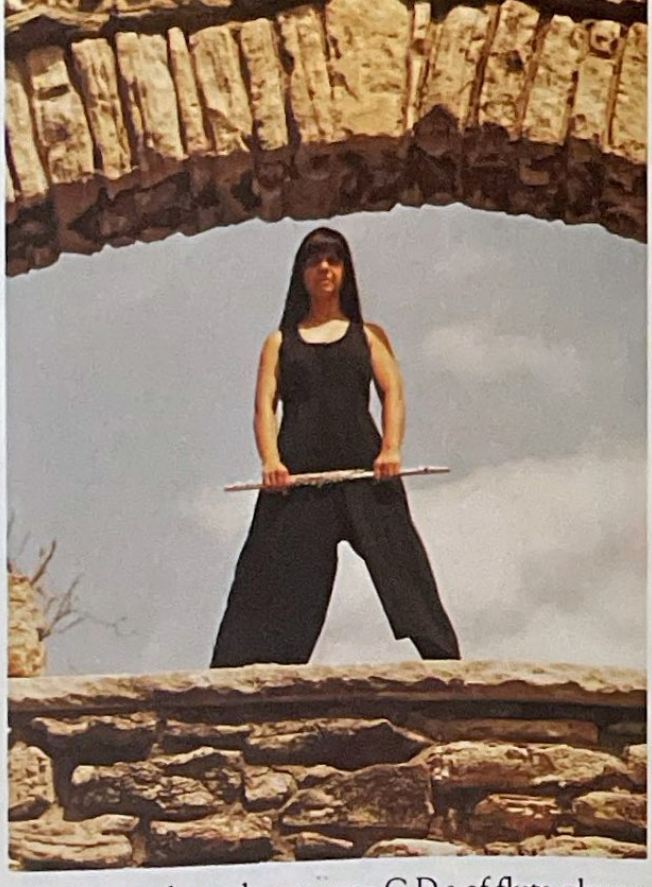
"It is good to begin improvising with a pentatonic scale because no notes sound wrong."

Kathleen Goll-Wilson, performer, teacher, and clinician, is the Editor of Flute Talk *magazine, and on the faculty of DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. She is the founder and director of the* Flute Talk *Competition and is a guest lecturer at masterclasses and festivals.*

Burr developed a technique to help students become more objective about their playing. "After working with a 10-year-old who thought she was God's gift to flute playing, I decided she wasn't aware of her mistakes. She was so cute, but most notes weren't even in the right octave. When I asked what she thought about her playing, she said the notes were great and the music was great. Because this response was too general, I came up with an analysis of the notes first, asking if all the pitches were correct and in the right octave graded on a scale of 1-10. Next we look at rhythm, then articulation, breaths, and sound. Breathing has to be in the places marked or in a musical spot, depending on the player's level. Sound is the only subjective parameter. As the student matures, we evaluate intonation, expression, and dynamics as part of the quality of sound."

Burr says that some students are too harsh on themselves and feel that an entire performance is a disaster if something is amiss. With this system of analysis it becomes clear that only one or two notes were mistakes. "By analyzing how many things went right, students develop a greater appreciation of their abilities. We go through a piece and assign a number for each category. Students who are too self-critical may give themselves a 5 out of 10 if only two notes are wrong. Eventually they discover that playing two wrong notes out of a hundred is not so bad after all.





"Many students do not own C.D.s of flute players and rarely listen to those they have, so I lend recordings for them to hear other examples of good flute playing besides mine. I try to give them a true mix, from bass flutist Matthias Ziegler to South American and pan flutes. I want them to come up with an individual concept of sound."

When she inherits students from other teachers, Burr spends a great deal of time developing a playing style or sound. "Generally students switch teachers because they have reached an impasse in certain areas that do not seem to improve. They are looking for a stable sound and technique of their own." Burr admits to being a bit of a philosopher when she uses the flute to help students find their musical personalities. "I like to think of myself as a life teacher." The focus of her teaching is perceiving and understanding the sequence of actions and reactions. "Many young players ask questions and use hand motions as they speak to stress their point. One student had trouble blowing, which she described as being unable to blow while holding the air back, referring to her abdomen but pointing to her lips. She knew the answer through body language but couldn't describe it accurately or change the series of events." Through some aspects of the Alexander technique, Burr helps students to become aware of body position. "Ultimately I try to let the student teach himself. My job as a teacher is to dispel doubt."

In every lesson Burr encourages a student to first describe what was good and what was not, "but always starting with the positive. For many years of lessons I was geared to attain perfection until I discovered this goal is elusive. The realization that perfection can never be achieved doesn't develop a positive attitude, so I ask students to comment first on the good aspects of a performance. Teaching

involves trust and is not a power play of teacher over student."

Burr has compiled a book of contest information for students who want to enter a competition. As they look through the book they consider what repertoire they are qualified to play. "If they ask me to suggest a piece, I often lend them some pieces from my library to sightread at home to see what feels right because it is easier for students to perform effectively on music they enjoy playing. It helps to play the first page and jump to the last page. I like working on a piece backwards because too often when students practice from beginning to end they do not have the time or energy to perfect the end of a work. In a performance when concentration is lost, it is usually at the end of the piece. I advocate getting the end of a piece down cold. We work out the difficult spots, of course, and then play straight through the piece. Many students stop every time they make a mistake and do not learn to go on no matter what happens, which is a technique that improves sight-reading skills as well."

With any repertoire, Burr stresses slow practice. Breath control improves with slow playing because this takes more endurance. "Then when a piece is played up to tempo, the breathing is easier. One of the greatest problems today is that flute players do not know how to breathe well. When a student returned to study with me after studying with another teacher, I couldn't believe how much worse her breathing had become. I like to tell students that the sound begins with the inhalation. Many players just breathe and start the sound. By paying attention to the intake of air, making sure it suits the mood and tempo of the music, they begin the flow of music with expression. The inhalation for a slow movement should be slow and calm, whereas a fast piece uses a quick, noiseless breath. I create a concept of noiseless breathing and call it an anti-Santa Claus breath, sucking air in by saying *ho* backwards."

When students play a bad attack or with a harsh sound, Burr has them repeat and exaggerate the mistake by overblowing it and then play it without any support to create the opposite result. "A player cannot develop an even, smooth sound and clear articulations without exploring the extremes. When they play with exaggerated mistakes, students can find their full potential."

To improve dexterity Burr tells students to sometimes slur everything and ignore all indicated articulations. "Little problems in fingering are often disguised by the articulation, but it takes smooth finger technique for good legato playing. When students slur everything while practicing or during a lesson, they readily hear problems between notes or between three groups of two notes. When specific problems arise, we isolate the fingers first. If the unevenness continues, we next consider lip placement and then air support."

Burr avoids painting a graphic picture of breath support because talking about muscles and sinews often confuses students and interferes with the process. "I talk about using proper posture so a student can breathe and blow freely. I often refer to lifting the sound and making a joyous sound that fills the room."

Burr has compiled a repertoire list for all levels of students, but she still allows them to play favorite Disney or pop tunes if that motivates them to practice and keeps their interest up. "We play these tunes along with a C.D. as a way to learn to improvise. I am amazed how many students cannot count in four or find the basic beat of a recording. As they play along to a recording they learn about the basic four-bar phrase and the subphrases."

Much of her teaching incorporates what she learned as a freelancer in Southern California. "One weekend I improvised solo flute for a wedding in the desert hills of Malibu, then played Baroque duets for a memorial service at a canyon home in Topanga, and finally played Classical solo flute selections for a private birthday bash at the Asian-Pacific Museum in Pasadena." In high school and college Burr won many competitions and wanted to become a soloist. "After many summers at orchestra camps, I studied with Jean-Pierre Rampal in Nice. I was a bit stubborn, opting for solo and chamber work over orchestral playing. The solo literature is difficult to market, but being a chamber musician is exciting and satisfying. I have also performed with dancers and played for theatrical productions."

With a master's in composition, Burr augments her playing and teaching by writing works, including the opening theme for a local cable television station. Her compositions have been performed at events throughout the world. The inspiration for her piece for flute and voice, *Syukhtun*, comes from an Indian term that means where the trail divides. "It is the native word for Santa Barbara. The Indians had to decide if they would stay on land or go off to the island. I wrote it for Ann LaBerge, who perfected the technique of playing one line while singing the other. I do not enjoy pieces that incorporate every extended technique for the sake of showing off extended techniques if these have nothing to do with the music." Burr believes that sounds have to become accepted as musical before they can be used to express emotions. "I have experimented with a special effects unit that distorts the single line of the flute into multiple layers of sound to create harmony. This is a great atmosphere for a dancer, but the flute community may not be ready for this sound yet."

Being versatile is a Burr trademark, and she often juggles her schedule around those of her students. "I require all new students to practice five days out of seven, out of respect to me and themselves." In teaching students how to practice efficiently Burr's goal "is to help them not need me."