

Flute Pain

Is the keyed, Boehm system, End Blown Flute a Viable Adjunct?

[summary of a Performance Health Care Committee presentation: NFA Orlando, 2018]

What is the Incidence of Flute Pain?

Fairly recently, Medical literature has addressed the following:

1. “The prevalence and incidence of musculoskeletal symptoms experienced by flautists” by Stanhope J, Milanese S, *Occup Med (Lond)*. 2016 Mar.

This study summarizes that it: “...*precludes a clear understanding of the prevalence and location of musculoskeletal symptoms in flautists, although current evidence suggests that the prevalence is high...*”

2. “Contributing factors, prevention, and management of playing-related musculoskeletal disorders among flute players internationally” by Lonsdale K, Laakso EL, Tomlinson V, *Med Probl Perform Art*. 2014 Sep;29(3):155-62

This study states: “...*26.7% of all respondents were suffering from flute playing-related discomfort or pain; 49.7% had experienced flute playing-related discomfort or pain that was severe enough to distract while performing; and 25.8% had taken an extended period of time off playing because of discomfort or pain...*”

3. “Incidence of injury and attitudes to injury management in skilled flute players” by Ackermann BJ, Kenny DT, Fortune J, *Work*. 2011;40(3):255-9. doi: 10.3233/WOR-2011-1227.

This study summarizes that: “...*Flautists in this sample reported high rates of performance-related musculoskeletal disorders with the majority having been present for longer than 3 months...*”

Additionally, there are ongoing testimonials and inquiries in non-medical sources. Here are just a few, located easily on the internet.

1. The Flutist’s Pain Points, June 17, 2011

<https://innovativeperformanceandpedagogy.wordpress.com/2011/06/17/the-flutists-pain-points/>

This article lists the wrist, upper back, shoulder, and lower back as most common areas affected. It also offers a series of helpful physical exercises.

2. Pain in right hand... Oct. 19, 2007

<https://www.fluteland.com/board/viewtopic.php?t=2287>

A flutist seeks helpful advice on this message board

3. Thumb Pain - Oct. 6, 2007

<https://fluteland.com/board/viewtopic.php?t=2267>

A flutist seeks helpful advice on this message board

4. “A Flutist’s Guide to Carpal Tunnel Syndrome” by Sandra Cox, D.M.A.
March 26, 2018

<https://www.flutespecialists.com/a-flutists-guide-to-carpal-tunnel-syndrome/>

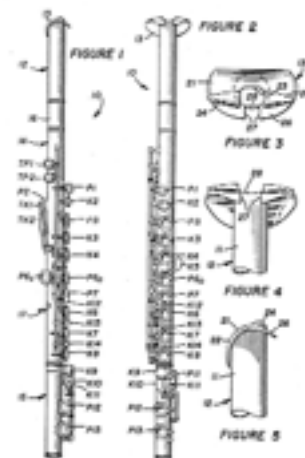
This article gives concise, helpful incites into managing CTS

5. “Flute Pain Cures” by Jen Cluff, Canadian flutist and teacher,
<http://www.jennifercluff.com/deathgrip.htm>

This one features a comprehensive series of helpful articles on flute pain

What exactly is the keyed, Boehm system, End Blown Flute? Let’s start with a picture as depicted below in the 1991 instrument patent of Sam Wesley, Sr. Notice that the lip plate is mounted uniquely on the end of the head joint. This facilitates the instrument being held and played in a relaxed position in front of the body, rather than transversely.

U.S. Patent 5,014,880 Filed 11/11/90 Sheet 1 of 4 5,014,880



In 1991, same year as the patent above, I was studying with Julius Baker, “The Dean of American Flutists”, and preparing to perform one of his master classes. My daily practice time averaged close to eight hours and for the first time I was experiencing pain while playing.

At the 1991 NFA Convention in Washington, DC I became a daily visitor at the End Blown Flute booth of Sam Wesley. By convention’s end I was coaching booth visitors in playing the instrument. Over the next few years, I not only was an endorser of the instrument, but became the first to record several CD releases featuring the Wesley End Blown Flute.

Following is a retrospective on the advantages and disadvantages of having adopted the Wesley End Blown Flute as an adjunct to flute-pain-management.

Advantages:

1. Upper body more relaxed when playing
2. Upper body pain of playing transversely immediately reduced and ultimately eliminated
3. Positioning the instrument in front felt and looked good to me, especially having played clarinet early on

Disadvantages:

1. Extended transition period requiring revisiting beginner’s rudiments
2. I felt the need to retrofit my flute to accommodate a neck strap in an effort to minimize the flute shifting-around in response to finger movements. The neck strap addition helped but did not completely eliminate the flute-shifting.
3. Over time I developed a subconscious habit of shifting my lower jaw around to follow the shifting flute. This became an involuntary reflex which eventually showed up in my transverse flute playing. I currently do daily exercises aimed at re-programming my lower jaw. A future article will detail the methodology and outcome of this process.

In summary, the Wesley End Blown Flute has proved an effective adjunct in immediately reducing, and ultimately eliminating, pain while playing flute. To ameliorate the initial feeling of being a beginner again, I alternated playing transversely-until-painful with beginners' exercises on end blown. A future article will report on the ongoing process of re-programming my lower jaw to eliminate the current involuntary jaw-shifting habit when playing transversely.

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