

Piccolo Practice: What Are You Waiting For? by Dr. Diane Boyd Schultz, Stephen F. Austin University

It's February, the shortest but somehow dreariest month of the year. Presents have been unwrapped, families and friends have toasted in the New Year, memories of the unusually warm fall have passed, and the next vacation seems far away. Worse, still, you realize that you have broken your New Year's resolution of practicing the piccolo, and you think it would be easier to abandon that resolution in favor of organizing all the junk in the bottom dresser drawer. Before you give up on the piccolo, though, and decide to wait until the summer to begin practicing it, read onward. You might be surprised to find renewed desire to acquaint yourself with the flute's first cousin after reading this article.

First of all you must determine what factors are preventing you from attempting the piccolo. Do you need a quality instrument? Do you need an occasion to play the piccolo publicly? Did you try it once in sixth grade and fail miserably? Do your fingers feel like uncoordinated bananas on the small keys? Do your parents/roommates/neighbors clamp their hands over their ears and run outdoors to escape your piccolo playing? Do you think it impossible to squeeze in more practice time into your already crowded days? Does the lack of lip plate leave you completely flummoxed? Do the high-pitched sounds bounce around your small practice space and cause your ears to ring? Do you think you don't have any suitable music to play? Whatever the reason—and there can be many—you must suppress those uncomfortable thoughts and forge ahead. All of these problems can be solved.

One reason many flutists avoid the piccolo is quite elemental: they do not have a quality instrument. If you are not able to purchase a good wooden piccolo, try to borrow one from your teacher, your school, or from a fellow flutist. There is nothing more frustrating than trying to play a piccolo with torn pads, poor regulation of mechanisms, and bent keys, as very few pitches will even sound, much less sound pleasantly. Examine the piccolo and look for obvious differences from the flute. Instead of silver or another metal, the piccolo is made of a hard wood and requires special care. The bore is conical rather than cylindrical, although you won't feel this difference when your fingers are in playing position. There are only two pieces, the head joint and the body, and there is only one key for the right hand pinky, the Eb key. The remainder of the keywork looks like the flute's, but the design includes rounded plates atop the mechanisms to allow for easier and more natural placement of the fingers. The final difference is the lack of lip plate on the headjoint. Before proclaiming that it will be impossible to play without the lip plate, review the flute's history—the lip plate didn't appear until the 1840's, and that was only on metal flutes. On closer inspection you'll notice that the embouchure hole's shape is perhaps remarkably similar to that of your flute and as a result, more familiar. The little piccolo is not so threatening after all, is it?

Once you have obtained and inspected the piccolo, you will then begin to coax sounds from it. Nobody said you had to carve an hour out of your schedule to practice piccolo, you simply have to *start*. Decide to play for five minutes in the middle of your flute practice session when you are well warmed-up and increase your time as you feel more comfortable. The close finger position and firm embouchure can be fatiguing if you try to play for extended periods without a good warm-up. If your practice area is small, you might want to use earplugs when practicing, as the high-pitched sounds reverberating in a confined space might damage your hearing over time. In fact, when you begin, it is best to play first and middle octave notes and ease your way into the third octave as you gain better embouchure control. You, the beginning piccoloist need not purchase new music; you can transfer warm-up and technique exercises from flute and play lyrical pieces such as those in Marcel Moyse's *Tone Development Through Interpretation*. Later on you can purchase appropriate methods for the piccolo that will address fingerings (flute fingerings will work on piccolo, but they are not always the best fingerings), special techniques, and orchestral excerpts. Composers are also writing for the instrument more than ever, and excellent solo literature for the piccolo has never been easier to find.

Perhaps you are the type that needs the additional motivation of public performance to inspire you to play piccolo. There are many opportunities waiting for you to do so, and they might include auditioning for the piccolo chair in your band or orchestra, volunteering to play piccolo in flute choir, or programming a piccolo piece in a solo/ensemble contest.

Playing the piccolo well results in several desirable outcomes. It will help strengthen your embouchure, encourage fast and light finger action, improve ear-training skills, and offer you a wider variety of performance opportunities and experiences. Ask yourself, "Do I want to be a better musician, or do I want an organized bottom dresser drawer?" No doubt you will renew your commitment to piccolo practice and be richly rewarded in the process.

Some students will play metal, metal headjoint/wooden body, or composite body piccolos. However, I prefer wooden piccolos for concert use, and I will address my remarks accordingly. Several piccolo makers have responded to the call for affordable, yet high quality, wooden piccolos.

Flutist and piccoloist Diane Boyd Schultz began her flute studies at age 11 in her native Mississippi and was awarded the Bachelor of Music degree with Honors from the University of Alabama and her M.M. and D.M.A. in Flute Performance from the University of North Texas. As a Rotary International Foundation Scholar, she studied at McGill University in Montreal, and she has been a winner and finalist in numerous competitions, including the Mu Phi Epsilon International Competition and the National Federation of Music Clubs Orchestral Winds Competition. She has performed with the Terre Haute Symphony, the Dallas Bach Society Orchestra, and the Richardson Symphony Orchestra, and she serves as a faculty member for the Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp. An active performer and clinician, she founded the Midwest Flute Festival in 1997 and has commissioned a new work for piccolo and harp for this season's concerts. Dr. Schultz is currently Associate Professor of Flute at Stephen F. Austin State University, where she coordinates undergraduate and graduate flute study, performs with the Stone Fort Woodwind Quintet, and conducts the flute choir.

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