

The High(er) Life: Transforming Good Flutists into Fearless Piccolo Players

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When I first started teaching flute at the university level, I would ask my new students if they owned or played a piccolo. This question was usually met with a look of sheer terror or utter disgust. This reaction was almost always due to a lack of training on the smaller instrument.

I now require all of the flute students at the Glenn Gould School in Toronto to play the piccolo. It not only allows them solo opportunities in the Royal Conservatory Orchestra, but they soon come to realize that doors will open for them in the professional world if they play the piccolo well. When I was still in university, I started to play the piccolo professionally in the Washington, D.C. area. My first job involved playing Rossini's *Semiramide* Overture at Wolf Trap Park with the Joffrey Ballet.

In this article, I hope to give teachers who are introducing their students to the piccolo some useful ideas and resources that will make the transition much easier for everyone.

Choosing the Right Student and Instrument

I do not recommend starting a flute player on the piccolo until they are at least in Grade 8 in school. A student should have established good breath control, a solid tone, and secure intonation before moving on to the piccolo.

The piccolo is a solo instrument in a band or orchestra and must be played as such. Your student should be a confident player who welcomes the spotlight. Select your piccolo player from the top students in your flute section.

In the past, I have seen many poor-quality piccolos in school music programs. One of my teachers, Samuel Baron of the New York Philharmonic, told me that the most important thing in playing the piccolo was to have an instrument that was reliable. Knowing that all the notes on it would speak with confidence allowed me to refine my playing while gaining valuable ensemble experience.

Today we are fortunate that there are numerous fine student piccolos on the market, some in the \$500-\$1000 range. I much prefer a wooden piccolo over those made of metal. Some student models may be made of plastic or carbon-fibre. These instruments can speak easily and sound very good. The advantage to these materials is that you do not have to worry about them cracking in cold weather, as you would with a wooden instrument.

The body of the piccolo should be conical and have the tone holes drilled directly into the bore. The embouchure hole should be cut into the head. It may take a student a while to get used to the lack of an embouchure plate, but they should adapt fairly quickly. Make sure that the top octave is not too stiff and that the low notes speak. The pads need to be flat and not hanging

out of the cups. They will restrict the sound if they get in the way of the open tone hole. I have cork pads on my piccolo and I love the stability they provide.

Because of its small conical bore, the piccolo body tends to collect a lot of moisture while being played. It is essential to swab the instrument often in order to prevent water from building up in the tube and forming bubbles in the keys. In the past few years, I have begun to use a flag-style cleaning rod for my piccolo. It comes in two pieces which, when attached, can swab the entire instrument without removing the head-joint. This is very handy during concerts and, as the flag is quite thin, there is less chance of it becoming stuck inside the instrument.

Beginning to Play the Piccolo

The piccolo embouchure is a smaller version of the flute embouchure. Many students make the mistake of tightening their piccolo embouchure too much, which quickly leads to fatigue and missed notes. The piccolo requires a smaller amount of air than the flute but the air needs much greater support and speed. I tell my students to examine how they are using their air in order to correct their tone problems. The lips direct the air but the tone is actually produced by using air from much lower in their body.

It is also important to keep an open throat and not to tense or raise the shoulders when playing the piccolo. Relax and concentrate instead on the use and speed of the air stream. These same concepts apply to good flute playing, but because the piccolo is a miniature version of the flute, it magnifies many of these issues.

The piccolo needs to sit a bit higher on the lower lip than the flute. This is a small adjustment that many students fail to make. Raising the piccolo on the lip yields big rewards.

Although playing the piccolo takes less air than flute playing, the piccolo requires much more vibrato to make the sound full and rich. Do not be afraid to vibrate much faster than you would on the flute. By doing this, the sound will come alive.

Because the piccolo is so small, intonation is a tricky issue. Frequent work with a tuner will help a student discover the pitch tendencies of the different notes. One suggestion to correct tuning problems is to have the student set the tuner on a drone pitch and then play scales and intervals based on the selected pitch.

In working on piccolo intonation, there is no substitute for playing in a large ensemble. Listening to the other instruments is vital for correcting pitch problems. One of the best instruments to match in pitch is the trumpet. The trumpet section can be heard above an orchestra or a band, and a good piccolo player will quickly learn to adapt to their pitch and not engage in a "tuning fight" with these colleagues.

Do not be afraid to use alternate fingerings. They can help solve many intonation and tone-colour issues, and are essential in playing soft dynamics. Jan Gippo's excellent new book, *The Complete Piccolo* (Theodore Presser Co.), contains a chapter on alternate fingerings. Students should find the fingerings that work best for their instruments and learn to use them on a regular basis. They will be amazed at how much easier and more enjoyable piccolo playing can be. I have listed some of my favourite fingerings in Figure 1.

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Figure 1. Some Favourite Fingerings

Left Hand: 1T234 / Right Hand: 1234
B above the staff: 1T3 / 124
C above the staff: 123 / 14
F# third octave: 1T3 / 23

Early Piccolo Lessons

When starting a student on the piccolo, I like to use the exercises at the beginning of the Trevor Wye book, *Piccolo Practice Book* (Novello). Wye uses middle E as a starting note, and adds other pitches in relation to it. This makes the point that it is important to be able to find the notes on the piccolo and be secure in their placement. This slow approach at the beginning will build students' confidence and allow them to feel comfortable on the instrument.

Much of the piccolo repertoire is technically difficult and not suitable for beginning study. I feel it is important for teachers to have some easier repertoire to help beginning piccolo students become solid performers. Playing slow movements from Baroque sonatas, such as those by Handel and Telemann, is an excellent way for students to familiarize themselves with the piccolo and to begin "singing" on it, much like the flute.

One of my favorite warm-up exercises is used by John Krell, who played piccolo for many years in the Philadelphia Orchestra. The exercise (see Figure 2) begins on low D and continues up the piccolo by half steps, from E-flat



to B-flat.



My suggestion for daily piccolo practice is that students reserve some time at the end of their flute practice session to work on piccolo exercises and solos.

Figure 2. Daily Warm-up Exercise.



Music for the Piccolo

There are many good piccolo method books available. I have listed a few in Figure 3. The Tulou book is a very good beginning method. The one

by Clement Barone is excellent and I often use it. Patricia Morris' book is essential for more advanced players.

Figure 3. Recommended Piccolo Method Books

Barone, Clement	<i>Learning the Piccolo</i> (Edu-tainment)
Morris, Patricia	<i>The Piccolo Study Book</i> (Novello)
Tulou, Jean-Louis	<i>Metodo Popolare per Ottavino</i> (Ricordi)
Wye, Trevor	<i>Piccolo Practice Book</i> (Novello)

Jan Gippo's book, mentioned earlier, is a "must have" for anyone who is serious about playing the piccolo. It is a fantastic resource, as it lists repertoire for solo piccolo and for the piccolo in chamber ensembles.

Thanks to the piccolo committee of the National Flute Association, many new works for piccolo have been commissioned in the past few years. In Figure 4 I have listed a few that I think would be enjoyable for piccolo players in high school or the early years of university. I encourage my university students to perform a solo work for piccolo on their degree recitals. This adds variety to their programs and encourages extra piccolo practice.

The magazine *Flute Talk* is also an excellent resource for discovering new solo repertoire for both the flute and the piccolo.

Figure 4. Recommended Solos for Piccolo and Piano

Balleron, Louis	<i>The Noisy Bird</i> (Little Piper)
Raum, Elizabeth	<i>Barcarole</i> (Vigo)
Schudel, Thomas	<i>Two Miniatures</i> (Kendor)
Spell, Eldred	<i>A Night at the Opera</i> (Alry)
Telemann, G. F.	<i>Sonata in F</i> (Rubank)
Zook, Jeffery, ed.	<i>Polkas for Piccolo and Piano</i> (Little Piper)

With so many affordable and excellent models of piccolos available, tuners that are portable and inexpensive, and a wealth of new music available for the instrument, we should no longer fear the "little beast," but rather embrace and enjoy the fun of learning a new and exciting instrument, the piccolo.

Questions about piccolo playing may be addressed to Dr. Rudolph at jkrudolph5@aol.com



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