

Grow Your Studio with Curved-Headjoint Fl

Helping petite students get a head start on studying the flute

By Meret Bitticks

The age of the late bloomer is over. Although I began playing in sixth grade, most of my colleagues began in fourth or fifth grade, which is now considered old. Many flute students start before reaching third grade. Their teachers discover that the benefits of working with young students include a higher rate of retention and students achieving a higher level of playing.

In order to accommodate shorter arms, teachers need to learn to work with curved-headjoint flutes. The average age of my Suzuki beginner is six years old, but I have started four and five year olds as well. I have found that under the age of nine, and in some cases ten, the student is more comfortable and more successful with a curved-headjoint flute.

Many fine student flute makers such as Yamaha, Jupiter, Trevor James, and Gemeinhardt offer models with a student closed-hole body and both a straight and a curved headjoint. I find this useful for those beginners not ready for full flutes because the straight headjoint is easier to play by itself as well as to manipulate into fun headjoint-only activities such as Hot Cross Buns or slide whistles. Parents of students with string-playing siblings especially appreciate the convenience of having one instrument that grows with the child. Di Zhao (as well as several of the above makers) sells a very responsive curved headjoint separately for around \$100 that can be fitted to any flute.

For especially young or petite students, Di Zhao's "Mini-D" and Jupiter's Prodigy model utilize "finger buttons" to effectively close the spread in the key system. The flute itself has a slightly smaller diameter and no footjoint or trill keys. It also does not come with a

straight headjoint. If using one of these flutes, remember to consider that this system can affect a child's ability to adapt to the standard key system—especially in the right hand when the trill keys prevent them from holding their fingers close together. Additionally, the child will most likely have to "graduate" to a regular curved-head flute before switching to a straight headjoint.

Many music stores offer curved-headjoint flutes for rent, or are willing to purchase a few to rent out. Have students rent a curved-headjoint flute if they are older and will grow out of it quickly or if you are otherwise unsure if they would benefit from one. It can always be easily exchanged for a straight headjoint if you change your mind. Serious students will ultimately find it beneficial to purchase one of their own. Some parents find used curved heads on ebay and purchase the flute separately. Others purchase the curved headjoints from other students who have outgrown them (which only works with a big enough studio with enough turnover.) If you plan to teach many young beginners, are brand-loyal, and have an extra \$100-200 lying around, buying one or two headjoints to lend or rent can be another viable option.

Once you have determined that a student needs a curved headjoint it is essential to align the headjoint properly. Curved-headjoint student flutes should not be treated like curved-headjoint alto flutes. The u-bend of the curved headjoint should be inserted so that the headjoint itself is exactly parallel to the body of the flute. From there, I treat the headjoint the same way I treat straight headjoints. In this way, the curved headjoint accommodates personal preference on lip-plate place-



ment. I use nail polish to mark placement references on the body and u-bend as well as the u-bend and lip-plate piece.

When flutes are properly set up, students who play on curved-headjoint flutes should not find it any more difficult to balance the flute than do beginners playing on straight headjoints. If they have trouble, that may be a reason to revisit their set-up.

I have noticed that over time curved headjoints can become quite loose. While I can't say if they become loose more often than straight headjoints do, a loose curved head will very negatively affect the student's playing and position. Fortunately, an experienced repair person can fix this problem easily once the parent actually brings the flute in. In the meantime a tiny piece of tape or a hair (yes, really) placed in the joint can alleviate the problem.

It is also critical to remind students to take the two pieces of the curved headjoint apart from time to time and clean the joints as well as to wash the u-bend. If they do not do this, the two pieces will fuse together with corrosion and be virtually impossible to take apart.

Students whose flutes have been set up properly and who take good care of their instruments can use them reliably for several years. However, they all hope to grow out of them and eventually they do. The most eager ones figure out their flutes are different from those of "taller" players and want to switch before they are ready. I insist upon waiting until they can hold the flute (with curved headjoint) up to their lips and simultaneously grab the end of the footjoint while keeping a right angle in their right arm. In my experience, their arms will be long enough to hold the straight flute once this requirement is met. Students who switch when their



Photo: Meret Bitticks

Natalie Richter, Age 9

arms are too short need to be reminded constantly to keep their flutes up—sometimes for several years.

A few students may be able to pop the straight headjoint on and never look back, but most need to switch between the two for a month or longer. I reserve the straight headjoint for pieces or exercises that are very comfortable and familiar and let them use the curved headjoint when I introduce new material. I have parents maintain this policy in home practice as well.

Although it is unlikely that the curved headjoint flute will ever enjoy the same popularity as quarter- and half-sized stringed instruments, parents are becoming more aware of their options for the musical education of their young children. Incorporating curved headjoints into your teaching gives you another tool for working with a greater variety of students and growing your studio.

www.chicagofluteclub.org