

# Contrary Finger Motion and the Three Little Devils of Flute Playing

by Michel Debost

“One cannot conquer an enemy one does not know”  
~ Chinese Proverb

Why do seemingly simple note patterns create unexpected problems? Even in scale patterns and in simple arpeggios, difficulties arise when fingers work in different directions. In order to be able to practice them, it is important to determine why certain patterns are more awkward than others. On the flute, our fingers move in only two directions: down and up. “Down” fingers, through gravity and natural reflex, move faster than “up” fingers. This is one good reason to avoid slamming and squeezing the keys. Remember: fast movement upwards, gentle landing downwards.

Here is a small catalog of antagonistic finger movements, in order of decreasing ease. Only the keys activated by fingers are shown. Keys filled in black indicate that the finger is down or on, even when the key vents a hole. Arrows show the direction of the moving fingers off: ↗ on: ↘. The flute diagram shows the first note of the example.

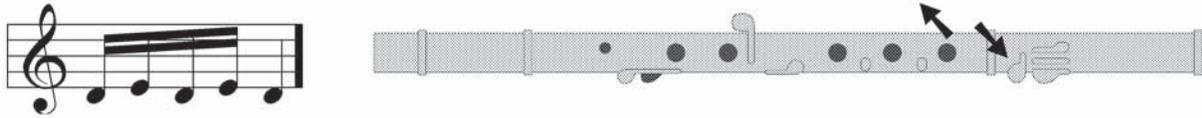
One finger of one hand in motion:

The first section illustrates one finger in motion. It consists of two rows of musical notation on the left and two corresponding flute diagrams on the right. The first row shows a scale starting on G4 (F4 on the flute) with notes G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G. The second row shows a scale starting on A4 (G4 on the flute) with notes A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A. In the flute diagrams, the keys for the notes are shown. Black dots on the keys indicate they are pressed. Arrows point to the keys being moved: up for the first row and down for the second row.

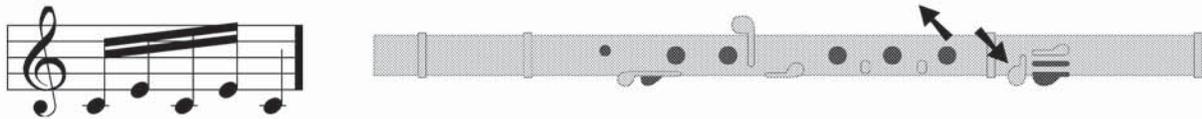
Two fingers of one hand in motion in the same direction:

The second section illustrates two fingers in motion in the same direction. It consists of two rows of musical notation on the left and two corresponding flute diagrams on the right. The first row shows a scale starting on G4 (F4 on the flute) with notes G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G. The second row shows a scale starting on A4 (G4 on the flute) with notes A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A. In the flute diagrams, the keys for the notes are shown. Black dots on the keys indicate they are pressed. Arrows point to the keys being moved: up for the first row and down for the second row.

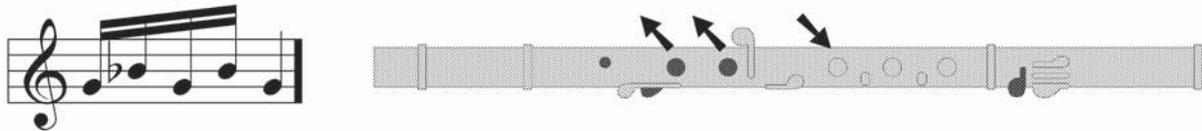
Two fingers of one hand in motion in opposite directions:



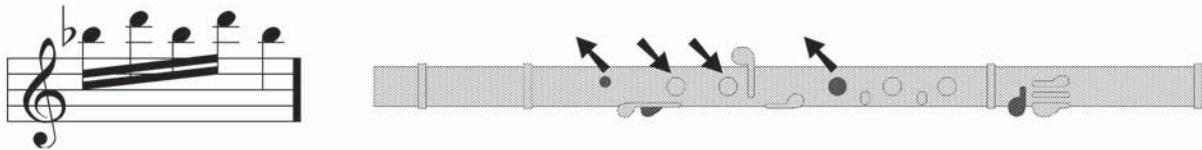
Two fingers of one hand in motion in opposite directions with displacement of little devil number two:



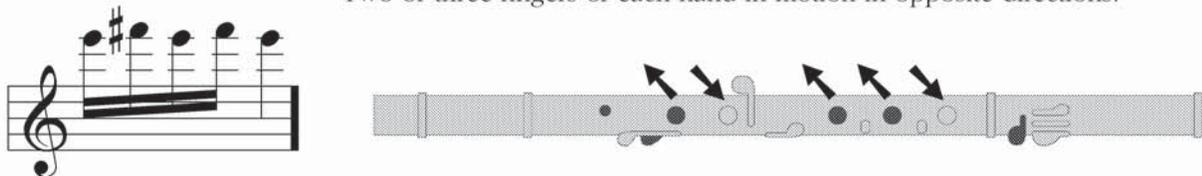
Two fingers of one hand in motion in one direction, one finger of the other in opposite direction:



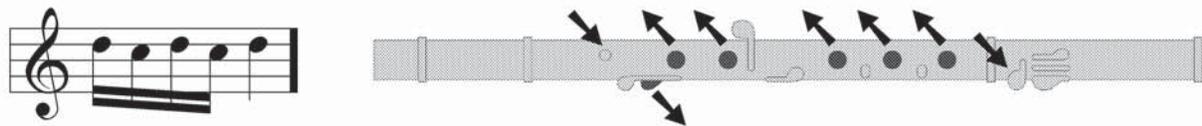
Two or three fingers of one hand in opposite directions, one finger of the other hand in motion:



Two or three fingers of each hand in motion in opposite directions:



A number of fingers of each hand in opposite directions:



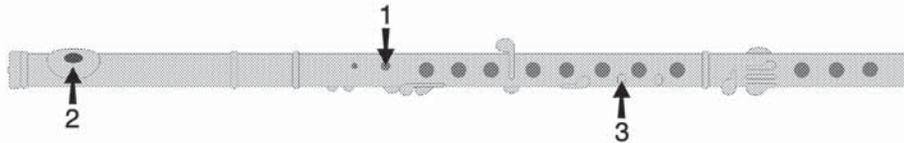
This last pattern is one of the most frequent and it remains one of the most awkward, even for the most seasoned players, regardless of the tempo.

The following examples offer the same difficulty, and they can be found, and practiced in many pieces or exercises. Practice these in both directions.



Repetition of these movements further increases difficulties. This is the reason why trill fingerings aim to offer the movement of one finger, or rarely two, of one hand in the same direction.

When many fingers are moving in contrary motion, the venting fingers (up) must work fast, whereas closing fingers (down) should not be falling hard and jam the keys. Do not hold the flute with note-producing fingers, but with the silent holding points: the first joint of the left forefinger (1), the right thumb (3), and, of course, the point of contact between the embouchure plate and the chin



(2), which must be stable at all times.

In my view, the right pinky should never be tight, for reasons we will now approach. It is one of what I call the Three Little Devils.

The Three Little Devils I am talking about are:

- the Left Forefinger—Little Devil no.1 (left forefinger),
- the Right Little Finger—Little Devil no.2 (right pinky),
- the Left Little Finger—Little Devil no.3 (left pinky).

For various reasons that we shall try to explore, they are responsible for many of our troubles.

### LITTLE DEVIL NO. 1—THE LEFT FOREFINGER

This is our “octave key,” as well as the center of balance of the flute, almost exactly halfway down the tube. (Unlike the other woodwinds, the flute has no real octave key. Among other uses, this one vents intervals for which the oboe, for example, would merely activate his real octave key.) Closed and unobtrusive in all the lower range up to middle C, it starts acting up for middle D and E-flat. How many of us and of our flute friends have had trouble with leaving the left forefinger down on E-flat, especially in descending scales? Flutists, teachers, please nip this Little Devil in the bud. It is very hard to get rid of this habit later.

Our Little Devil no.1 becomes really a nuisance in the medium and upper range. Many broken slurs come from it, mostly in slow movements. (See examples below.) Many passages show the perfidy of both Little Devils no.1 and no.2. They have an innocent appearance but we must dominate their actions before resorting to jaw twisting. It is more a finger and stability matter than an embouchure problem.

If you have difficulty with slurred intervals that you thought were easy, instead of “lipping” or “jawboning” them, think of our Little Devil no. 1... For example:

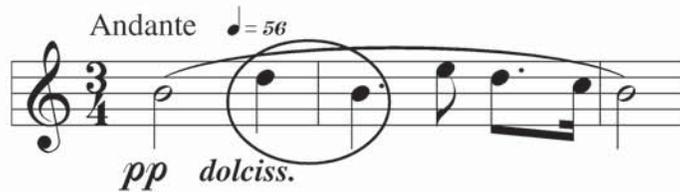
Mozart *Concerto in D*, 2nd movement, m. 11



Poulenc *Sonata*, beginning of 1st movement



Ibert *Concerto*, beginning of 2nd movement



The bent position of the left forefinger makes its action slower when it comes down to close this vital key, contrary to other fingers which are harder to lift than to put down. Therefore, we should try to compensate this relative slowness. Actually, the first joint of the left forefinger is essential for stability of fingers as well as sound, the center of gravity, the point of support for technique and articulation.

## LITTLE DEVIL NO. 2—THE RIGHT LITTLE FINGER

Its evil spells are due mainly to the fact that it must rise as the others come down, and that we have learned to keep it open at all times except for D's, and, in fact, to hold the flute with it, to the extent that we often see a right pinky almost bent back, so tightly is it pushed down on the D-sharp key. The consequence is that Little Devil no.2 sometimes refuses to come back up when told, thus slowing down an entire run.

That is why, at the risk of sounding heretical, I advise to not consider the D-sharp/E-flat key as a major holding point. Instead the flute should be stabilized in three points of support, all of which are not used for fingering notes: the first joint of the left forefinger, the tip of the right thumb, and of course, the lip plate. In other words, the flute should be held first and foremost by those fingers that do not make notes. That excludes the right pinky, most of the time. Conse-



Both systems have their advantages and inconveniences, as well as fanatics and adamant opponents.

In our prevalent French System flute (closed G-sharp key in-line system), we have a tendency to tense up on the fingers in the high range (E-flat, A-flat), when we are nervous. Enter Little Devil no.3. For no apparent reason, except this tension, an innocent little run that worked fine at home will not work under stress. The reason is that Little Devil no.3 refuses to leave the A-flat key because it is being squeezed: it must be put under surveillance like the other devils.

Our hands should be a help, not a hindrance. More than just practicing blindly, it takes thinking and changing our conventional approach to fingerings. There are no "good" or "bad" fingerings as some puritans would have it. If you find five different ways to play something, "Bravo!" Some serve the music better. That should be our priority. If on top of that they are easier and give us more pleasure, why resist?

After some fifty years of flute playing, I still find that a slow mezzopiano or mezzoforte G-major scale in the middle range is difficult to do, to do well, that is. Why? Must be those little devils.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MICHEL DEBOST is one of the premier flutists of the French school. He attended the Conservatoire de Paris, and studied with Jan Merry, Gaston Crunelle and Marcel Moyse. He won the major international competitions for his instrument (Moscow, Prague, Geneva, Munich, Turin). For many years, he was Principal Flute of the Orchestre de Paris under music directors Munch, Karajan, Solti and Barenboim. He has toured the United States as a soloist every year since 1963. He succeeded Jean-Pierre Rampal as Professor at the Conservatoire de Paris. Debost has recorded most of the repertoire on LPs and CDs, for EMI, Angel, Toshiba, Flute Traversière, DGG, Kontrapunkte, and Skarbo labels. He now lives in the USA with his wife Kathleen Chastain. Both teach at Oberlin College Conservatory in Ohio.

Michel Debost is Consulting Editor for *Flute Talk*, where he writes a monthly column, "Debost's Comments". He has published in 1996 in Paris a book on flute-related topics titled: *Une Simple Flute...* Japanese and Spanish versions will be published in the coming months. Oxford University Press will publish *A Simple Flute ...* in English (1998/1999).

Recent CDs include *Flute Panoramas I, II, III, IV* on Skarbo (French Music for Flute 1900-1950), *Entracte* (Music for Flute and Harp) on Kontrapunkte, and *Doppleriana* on Orfeo, all available through flute shops and record stores.

EMI France has just reissued, on CD remastered, his recording of the Mozart Concertos with the Moscow Chamber Orchestra.