

Those Pesky B-Flat Fingerings!

by Patricia Surman, DMA

It is one of those fingering issues that many flute teachers assume that their students already understand and band directors may not really be aware of, but which leaves students to their own devices. In my musical life, I find that most students and professionals alike that do not fully utilize the three B-flat fingerings. We all know that composers place great technical demands on flutists, and being fluent in fingering choices will serve to increase a player's technical facility. This article will provide a "best practice" model for choosing between each of the three B-flat fingerings in a musical context and supply the student with exercises for developing their B-flat fingering fluency.

The three B-flat fingerings:

1+1 or Long Bb



Thumb Bb



Lever Key



Most fingering charts list the 1+1 B-flat as the default fingering, and it is widely accepted as the first one for beginner flutists to learn. It is a good fingering choice for first-year players, because it provides a great deal of stability in holding the instrument and at the same time, it is an open note. Young students typically find that the lack of resistance makes it easier to get their first sounds. Although this is most commonly the first B-flat fingering learned, it is the least often needed by flutists who use all three fingerings.

Once a student has the basic fingerings mastered, it is necessary to introduce the other two fingerings. The composer Guilio Briccaldi added the Thumb B-flat key in 1849. This fingering should be the student's first choice, it can be used when playing in keys that use B-flats

or A-sharps but do not use B-naturals or C-flats. It should be used by leaving the thumb in the B-flat position on the other notes that require the thumb to be depressed, such as A, G, or F, etc. There are only two instances in which a flutist cannot use the Thumb B-flat: when moving from B-flat to B-natural, and when playing a third octave F-sharp/G-flat. The Thumb B-flat fingering is quite useful when playing in flat keys up to five flats, but use caution when playing g minor passages in the third octave because of the possibility of F-sharps.

What about the lever key? Originally added to the flute in 1800, it is the most under-utilized fingering, but once a player gets in the habit of using the lever key, it is almost indispensable. This key should be used whenever there is a chromatic motion from B-flat to B-natural. During ascending chromatic passages, flutists can lean on the lever key in anticipation of the approaching B-flat (a technique referred to as a *prepared fingering*). This might seem awkward at first, but once this technique is mastered, the flutist will never turn back!

Mastery of all three B-flat fingerings is an essential part of the development of technical proficiency on the flute. Here are some exercises that will help the player become fluent. This excerpt from Giuseppe Garibaldi's *Etude in F major, Op. 132/2* illustrates the technique of shifting from Thumb B-flat to B-natural:



Example 1. *Etude in F major, Op. 132/2* by Giuseppe Garibaldi

Try playing this passage once with 1+1 B-flat and then again using the Thumb B-flat. It is easy to recognize the economy of motion that is provided by using the best fingering for the passage.

The following excerpt from JS Bach's *Sonata in b minor*, BWV 1030/1 highlights the advantages of using the lever key. The nimble touch of this small and light key in combination with the ability to use the lever key as a prepared fingering aide the player in playing this difficult technical passage.



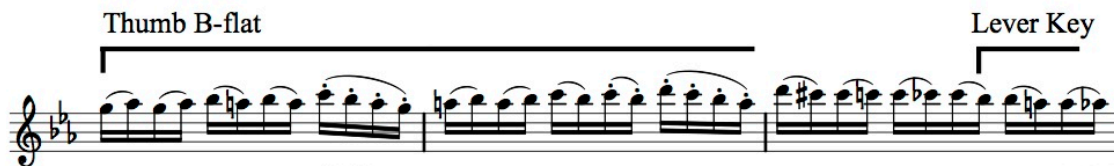
Example 2. Andante from *Sonata in b minor*, BWV 1030 by Johann Sebastian Bach

The following two excerpts are from Georges Bizet's *Minuet from L'Arlesienne Suite No. 2* and demonstrate the technical advantage afforded to a player who is able to be flexible with fingering choices. Greater fingering efficiency leads to faster and more stable technique. In example three, the advantage to using the 1+1 B-flat on the third measure is that the first finger of the right hand is already down on the D and F, so leaving it down for the B-flats increases stability and efficiency.



Example 3. *Minuet from L'Arlesienne Suite No. 2* by Georges Bizet

When following this method, the most commonly used B-flat fingering is the Thumb B-flat. Students should learn to quickly assess passages that call for another choice. The most obvious passage is one that involves chromatic motion between B-flat and B-natural. The following examples incorporate both descending and ascending chromatic motion.



Example 4. *Minuet from L'Arlesienne Suite No. 2* by Georges Bizet



Example 5. *Volière from The Carnival of the Animals* by Camille Saint-Saëns

Here are some exercises and an etude for practicing the three B-flat fingerings. The first three are designed to practice each fingering in isolation, and the etude requires the player to switch between the three fingerings.

Use Thumb B-flat



Use Lever Key



Use 1+1 B-flat



Take a look at the following etude and decide what fingering would be most appropriate for each B-flat. After learning this one, try writing your own exercises and etudes!



Dr. Patricia Surman, is Artist-Teacher of Flute at Northeastern Oklahoma State University and Instructor of Flute at Southwestern Oklahoma State University where she teaches applied flute and flute choir. She has taught flute, chamber music, music history, and music theory at the University of North Texas, Southwestern Adventist University, and Tulsa Community College. She earned her BM in flute performance from the University of Redlands, MM in flute performance and MM musicology

from the University of North Texas, and DMA in flute performance with a minor in music theory at UNT. She has performed as a recitalist and given masterclasses across the United States, in Europe, and in Asia. Recent appearances include College Music Society's 2011 International Conference, the National Flute Association's Annual Convention, Oklahoma Flute Fair, Flute Festival of the Mid-South, Florida Flute Association State Conference, and the Rochester Flute Fair. Her primary teachers include Mary Karen Clardy, Sara Andon, and Cynthia Ellis.

www.patriciasurman.com