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Flute Talk

Articles September 2008

Advice for Students

Albert Tipton's Top 10 Contest Tips

By [Heather Small](#)

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Tipton, an accomplished orchestral player and teacher, felt that "students entering a competition could benefit more from the experience if they were aware of the judges' aims as well as their own."

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While searching for a treatise topic at Florida State University, I started reading about American flutist, Albert Tipton. Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1917, he studied with William Kincaid at the Curtis Institute of Music and later played principal flute with the Detroit and Saint Louis Symphonies. He was also principal flute in the Aspen Festival Orchestra during the

summers. After his prolific orchestral career, Tipton became the flute professor at Florida State University and the Shepherd School of Music in Houston, Texas.

It was during his many years of teaching that he wrote editorials for the now defunct magazine, *The School Musician Director and Teacher*. Among the many musical topics he addressed was judging contests. In his opinion, students entering a competition could “benefit more from the experience if they are aware of the judges’ aims as well as their own.”

The following ten tips are summarized from an article Tipton submitted in 1971, originally titled “Notes on the Judging of Contests,” and printed in the August-September issue of *The School Musician Director and Teacher*. Perhaps his ideas will give you a better perspective as to what may be going through the judges’ minds at your next competition.

1. Tonal Focus

This is the most important aspect of performance. Your sound should have a focused core. Good intonation is equally important, so practice playing with other instruments to learn to tune with the piano and play intervals correctly. Assess the quality of your tone. It should not sound airy or forced in the high register.

2. Accuracy

In most instances when you perform a solo take care to interpret the dynamics on the page correctly instead of making up your own. Have a friend listen as you play and ask for feedback, or record yourself to listen for an accurate performance. Maybe you missed a note within a run and did not hear the mistake. Check on the accidentals. You should carry them through the entire measure unless the composer indicates otherwise.

3. Understanding Rhythm

Subdivisions and a steady beat are essential elements of performing rhythms correctly. For example, these two rhythms are often confused and played to sound the same way:

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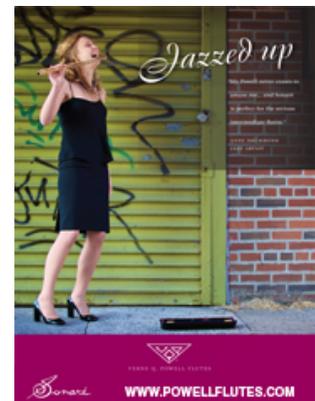
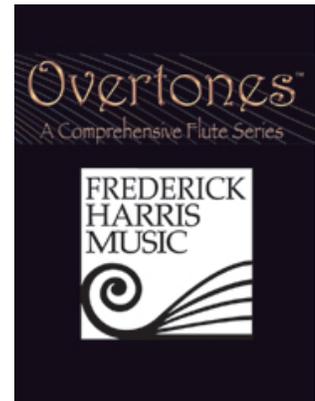
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If rhythm is one of your weaknesses, try practicing with a metronome and subdivide each beat.

4. Technique

We tend to think that technique is fluid fingers at fast tempos. Tipton, however, wrote that finger evenness, legato playing, articulation, dynamic range, and tone projection are all part of technique. In other words, practice your scales and etudes.

5. Phrasing and Musicality

It is often difficult to develop a sense of musical line and learn to shape phrase endings. Tipton advised students to listen carefully to their teachers and consult recordings. Try singing parts of the music out loud and imitate your singing on the flute.

6. Style

If you've ever acted in a play, you know that each character has a variety of costumes and a unique way of delivering lines. Music is similar in that each composer follows certain compositional rules and writes with a particular sound in mind. A winning performance demonstrates an understanding of the composer's style.

7. Ensemble

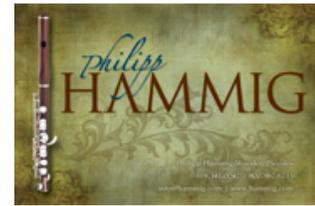
Whether you are performing with a pianist or other wind instruments, it is crucial to be a team player, which includes starting together and playing in the same tempo. A judge should be able to hear the melody at all times, so listen to the melody carefully during rehearsals. If you can't hear it, you are probably too loud. These are elements to consider when studying the score and preparing for a contest.

8. Personality

Sometimes the difference between two perfect performances boils down to a player's personality or the way he approaches the music. For example, one musician may exude confidence on stage while another shows his tension. Show that you enjoy playing the music.

9. Stage Presence

Tipton wrote that performers set the mood from the moment they walk onto the stage. Everything from posture to tuning the instrument creates an impression with the judges. Make a videotape of your performance to disclose any visible nervous ticks. It



will also polish your presentation style.

10. Memorization

Flutists are seldom required to memorize, but memorization is a great tool. It can enhance the performance experience, provide more confidence, and pave the way for a deeper understanding of the piece. As a judge I am always impressed with those who perform from memory.

One final thought – try to maintain a healthy attitude throughout the competition process. As Tipton recommends, be open and receptive to the judges' comments, not just to the final score and the trophy. Good luck!

Heather Small

Heather Small is visiting assistant professor of flute at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. She earned a doctorate at Florida State University where she was a graduate teaching assistant. She won the 2008 New Music Competition at the Kentucky Flute Festival, and she recently performed at the N.F.A. convention in Kansas City.

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