

Inner Flute



Rae Terpenning playing a Christmas concert with a tin soldier joining the fun.

Never Give Up

After a debilitating stroke, the author worked for years to recover her ability to play the flute. Thanks to a tailor-made, one-handed flute and a special headjoint devised by manufacturers an ocean apart—and her own hard, steady work—she is playing again.

by Rae Terpenning

“Things are *right* again!” wrote Sally Buffington, my friend from conservatory days, when she learned I had my new one-handed flute. And that is exactly how I feel.

In the early morning hours of February 15, 2010, I suffered a major stroke and was taken by ambulance from our Washington home on Whidbey Island to our area’s largest trauma hospital 70 miles away in Seattle. Fortunately, Harborview Medical Center has an excellent

reputation for treating stroke, so I was in good hands.

I was admitted to the ICU, later moved to the CCU, and eventually sent to the rehab unit. For six weeks I had a busy daily schedule at the hospital, working with excellent and encouraging medical staff: doctors, nurses, physical therapists, occupational therapists (who deal with the upper extremities), speech therapists, and recreational therapists (who teach community reintegration).

Sometimes I wondered if the staff knew what to make of the patient who had flute music playing in her room all day.

The stroke paralyzed my left side and, at first, I couldn’t even sit on the edge of the bed without falling over. In those early weeks, family and friends—many of them NFA colleagues—rallied around me. Cards poured in and lifted my spirits, soon covering my bulletin board and my door and spilling over onto strings on the walls. One day, the fire marshal

came through on an inspection. He gently informed us that all those cards posed a fire hazard!

When I was able to go home, therapists came to the house several times a week to work with me. The “old” view of stroke rehab was that if one didn’t recover functions in the first six to 12 months, one wouldn’t get them back. Fortunately, that is not the thinking today. Improvements may continue, usually in small increments, even years after an episode. I think most flutists would agree that, as musicians, we are better equipped than most to profit from rehab. We know how to work on things in small segments and how to repeat those segments over and over until we get the desired results. A good mantra is “Never, never, NEVER give up!”

One-Handed Flute: Beginnings

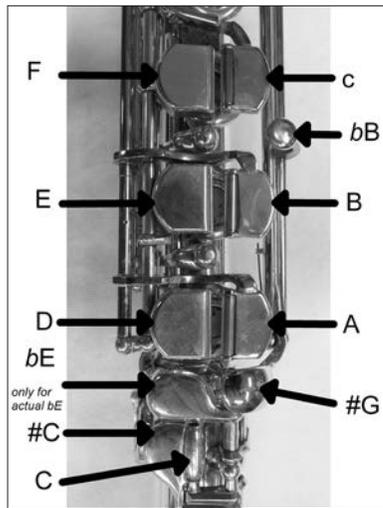
In the third year of therapy, one of my therapists asked if there might be such a thing as a one-handed flute. I had previously resisted looking into that question because I thought it would be giving up on rehab, which I wasn’t ready to do. The therapist pointed out that I didn’t need to give up the quest to regain the use of my left hand and arm, but if I could get a one-handed flute, I could get back to playing sooner.

I missed playing so much that I decided to look into it. My husband found Maarten Visser, a maker of adaptive wind instruments who lives in Amsterdam. We checked and got good feedback about Visser, who had previously made several one-handed flutes.

With my husband’s help, I began a lengthy e-mail exchange with Visser. He had many questions for me. Did I still have enough breath control to play? (Yes.) Did I have enough strength to hold up the instrument? (No.) Did I have enough control of my lips and facial muscles to form an embouchure? (Yes. I had been blowing on a headjoint, so I knew I could get a sound and change octaves.) Could I stand up to play, or would I need to be seated? By that time, I could stand and walk short distances with a cane, but standing for long periods was an issue.

Visser suggested that a vertical headjoint would be a good option for me. With a vertical set-up, I could sit in my wheelchair and rest the flute on a floor stand.

To my surprise, he offered two possible fingering systems. One would be easier physically but more challenging mentally, while the other would be the opposite. He sent me fingering charts for both systems



Top of right-hand section with key names.



Top of headjoint with malachite crown.



Middle section of flute, showing rollers.



End of flute on stand, showing holding system.



Terpenning playing duets with Karla Flygare (principal flutist, Pacific Northwest Ballet).

and told me to imagine playing scales with each of the systems so I could decide which one I wanted.

I finally chose the system that required more of me mentally, reasoning that the challenge would be good for my brain. The idea of discarding the fingerings I had practiced at least a million times and replacing them with new ones was daunting, but I was eager to attempt the project.

Visser offered to make a non-playing mock-up of the instrument, which would allow me to answer his questions about key placement, etc., and which gave me confidence in the viability of the final product. When the mock-up instrument arrived, I had a session with my occupational therapist to get her input about the proposed configuration.

Visser would take an existing instrument—in my case a Cooper-scale Powell I had used in the past—strip the keys, move some of the tone holes, and then create two rows of keys with numerous auxiliary keys, all to be worked with the right hand. I was concerned that this “new” instrument might not have the tone I wanted, so I asked if I could use the embouchure from a Landell headjoint that I knew I liked. The answer was “yes” and Jon Landell agreed to put the embouchure assembly on the new flute when it was finished.

The Real Thing

In March 2014, when Visser and I thought all necessary details had been settled, he began work on the instrument. He warned me that it would take many months to complete the work, but, thanks to the magic of the Internet, he sent me pictures and even a video of the progress.

It was hard to be patient, but finally, in October, the flute was shipped to Jon Landell in Vermont and then to me in Washington. What a joy to actually hold this creation in my hands! The first day I had the flute, I played “Hot Cross Buns.” Even though the tone sounded terrible because I hadn’t played in over five years, I felt victorious.

I knew that I had many challenges ahead of me. But one thing I had not anticipated was that with only one functioning hand, I couldn’t put the instrument together. Thankfully, my husband had been a music ed major, so he was able to assemble the flute and play-test the instrument for me.

I had many things to figure out, and there were no instruction books and no experienced teachers to guide me. How high should the stand be off the floor? What angle would work best for the headjoint and the embouchure? How much pressure should I use when sliding my fingers from one row of keys to the other?

I quickly learned that there were multiple alternate fingerings available, even multiple possibilities for which finger to use on some keys. What direction should I go? When I discovered that my pinky finger could not reach the low C and C sharp keys, Visser had me send the footjoint back to Amsterdam and he extended those keys to be reachable.

By the time I learned the fingerings for the two lower octaves, Christmas season was approaching. Kim Breilein, a local teacher and colleague, invited me to join her Enchanted Flutes flute choir to play holiday concerts. The informal concerts were exactly the opportunity I needed. I learned the easy parts and I had a wonderful time playing in an ensemble again.

As I built up my lip muscles and worked on the third octave, some of the high fingerings just didn’t work. Zart Dombourian-Eby and Sandy Saathoff to the rescue! They made the two-hour trek to my house and spent an afternoon helping me solve some of the problems I had encountered. I am pleased to report that I now have a full three-octave range on this special instrument. Some of the third octave fingerings are awkward, so I am not ready to play fast passages in that range—yet.

The Journey Continues

I have music back in my life, but this journey with my one-handed flute is far from over. I have my flute on a peg on the floor in my music room where I have created a “practice station.” I can wheel up to the music stand and play every day, and I am grateful that my special flute is there waiting for me. Pieces I tried in the early weeks and thought I would never be able to play are slowly taking shape.

There has been one unanticipated result of playing my flute again: using my embouchure muscles has made my smile, crooked since the stroke, much straighter!

Rae Terpenning earned a bachelor’s in flute performance (magna cum laude) and a master’s in flute performance at the New England Conservatory, where she studied with James Pappoutsakis. She studied for a year with Fernand Caratgé in Paris on a Fulbright Grant. Now retired, Terpenning was a long-term faculty member at both Seattle Pacific University and Pacific Lutheran University and a member of the Pacific Northwest Ballet Orchestra (second flute and piccolo) for 19 years. She was founding vice-president of the Seattle Flute Society and served the NFA as secretary and as chair of the Pedagogy Committee.

Editor’s note: For more about Maarten Visser and his flutes, see the article by David Nabb in the spring 2007 issue of this magazine and visit flutelab.com.



The entire flute on the stand.