

Ten essential exercises for Irish flute playing by Jon Antonsson

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1. Long Notes

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62TlIb4dtjI>

D-Drone: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKfBoqvNvF8>

Purpose: Start up the respiratory system and build stability.

Credit: Eamonn Cotter - Ennis, Ireland 2013

- Start the D-Drone.
- Take a deep breath (silently) and play any note in the key of D.
 - Pay attention to how the flute resonates with the drone.
- Strive to play as powerfully as you can for the longest duration possible.
 - If the tone starts to diminish, confidently bring it to a close. In doing so, you're also honing your ability to execute clear endings. Repeat this process multiple times with notes that you're inclined to play.
- Listen and feel how the different tones harmonize with the drone.
- Take another deep breath, but this time aim to play as softly as possible.
 - Maintain this for as long as you can while still preserving the pitch and stability.

2. Natural Tone Scale

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vc6ar4Z1hg>

D-Drone: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKfBoqvNvF8>

Purpose: Strengthen tone and find the optimal positions for the embouchure.

Credit: Markus Tullberg & Andreas Ralsgård - Malmö, Sweden 2015

- Start the D-Drone and 60 BPM Metronome.
- Hold the flute lightly and relax into the sound of the instrument.
 - Keep all fingers down throughout the entire exercise.
- Take a deep breath and play low D, then the second octave D2 without lifting the index finger (B).
 - Do not articulate these two notes separately. Focus on the transition area between the octaves and practice this passage repeatedly.
 - Imagine the sheet music in front of you, and we're 'zooming in' on the specific notes we want to practice at the moment.
 - Continue practising until the difficulty unravels.
 - Then, 'zoom out' until the passage flows smoothly, like running water.
- When you're ready, repeat the process from D2 to the next note in the natural tone scale, A2, keeping all fingers down and avoiding note separation.
 - Notice how the embouchure adjusts between the two notes, D2 and A2.
- Apply the same approach from A2 to D3.
- Finally play D1 - D2 - A2 - D3 and back again
 - Be mindful of your breathing.

3. Intonation

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbG7dHitcDA>

G-Drone: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rM_XCr6dWkQ

Purpose: Flexible embouchure and improve your ear.

Credit: Conor Crimmins - Limerick, Ireland 2016

- Start the G-Drone and play G.
- Using only your embouchure and the power of your airflow, lower the pitch as close to an F# as possible.
 - Visualize your mouth 'giving up' or relaxing. Your mouth descends almost entirely, but a tone still remains.
- You have now played G and lowered the pitch (as well as one could today).
 - It's acceptable if the strength is low at this point.
- Position your index finger on F# and simultaneously increase the airflow and elevate the embouchure.
 - This raises the pitch to match the F#.
- Attempt to align the 'lowered-G-F#' with a regular F#.
 - Naturally, this technique can be applied between any notes. Experiment and enjoy the process!
 - The objective is for the embouchure to stretch, thereby becoming more flexible and relaxed.

4. Whistletones

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPImsgIz9Fw>

Purpose: Even more flexible embouchure.

Credit: Conor Crimmins - Limerick, Ireland 2016

As in the previous exercise, allow the embouchure to 'give up' to relax. If the pitch lowers, that's a positive sign. Now, we will stretch the embouchure even further. The note B is typically the easiest for this exercise.

- Form the inside of your mouth to match the note you intend to play; in this case, B.
- Without the flute, whistle the note B, then slightly open your mouth.
- Now, blow into the flute on the note B in this exact position, using a minimal amount of air.
 - A very small quantity of air is required.
 - If you think it sounds 'mysterious' or 'odd', then you've likely succeeded!
 - If you don't achieve a whistle tone now, that's okay.
 - The objective is to stretch the embouchure.

Now, we'll transition from this 'whistle-B' back to a regular B.

- Reverse the embouchure from the whistle tone all the way up to a robust and clear B.
- Visualize a 'spectrum of relaxation' for your embouchure.
 - On one end, it's stretched into what's known as a 'smiley embouchure'.
 - On the other end, it's completely relaxed.
 - The goal is to stretch the embouchure from one end of the spectrum to the other, without resorting to a smiley embouchure.
 - This practice will significantly enhance your awareness of where your embouchure should be positioned to produce the best possible tone.

5. The Worm

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcmxwdI699U>

D-Drone: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKfBoqvNvF8>

Purpose: Fundamental for all Irish ornaments.

Credit: Markus Tullberg (who got it from Jörgen Fischer) - Malmö, Sweden 2015

- Start the D-Drone and 60 BPM Metronome.
 - Play low D as powerfully and steadily as before, keeping all fingers down throughout this exercise.
 - Execute a 'flicky' movement with the ring finger D
 - Raise and lower it instantly.
 - This is the Irish ornament known as 'cut'.
 - Perform this 'flicky' movement on the middle finger E, and again with the index finger F#.ul> - When you lift the fingers, no note should be heard, only the low D being 'cut' twice.
 - Listen to how the tone sounds between these cuts.
 - It's easy to focus too much on the fingers. Remember the first exercise and strive to maintain the best tone possible.
- Use the metronome to execute these cuts on the beat.
 - First D (ring finger), then E (middle finger), then F# (index finger) in the sequence D, E, F#.
- The next three fingers are: E (long), then F# (index), then G (ring finger on the other hand).
- Repeat each trio of fingers two to five times in a row before moving on to the next trio.

The entire exercise is as follows:

D,E,F# E,F#,G F#,G,A G,A,B A,B,A *** B,A,G A,G,F# G,F#,E F#,E,D E,D,E

6. Rolls

Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gn_kn8lRvQ8

G-Drone: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rM_XCr6dWkQ

Purpose: Rhythmic Stability.

Credit: Markus Tullberg - Visingsö, Sweden 2012

- Start the 60 BPM Metronome.
- To perform the Irish ornament 'Roll', play the note itself first, followed by a cut above the note, and then a 'tap' below.

A tap is the same as a cut but you drop a finger instead of raising one;

- Allow the finger below the note to drop in the same flicky manner as in the previous exercise.
- Execute the rolls on the beat of the metronome.
- Repeat them as many times as you wish before switching to another note.
 - The key is to maintain the rhythm.

Now, let's do the roll starting from above G.

- Play A on the beat, then G, and on the next beat, perform a cut on G (ring finger), followed by a tap on F# (index finger).

Next, we'll do the roll starting from below G.

- Play F# on the beat, then G, and on the next beat, perform a cut on G (ring finger), followed by a tap on F# (index finger).
- Repeat this with all notes.

7. Cranns

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r4x76I20og>

D-Drone: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKfBoqvNvF8>

Purpose: More Rhythmic Stability.

Credit: Conor Crimmins - Limerick, Ireland 2016

The piping ornament 'crann' comprises two or three cuts and is performed as follows on low D;

- Start the 60 BPM Metronome.
- Play D, then execute a cut on G (ring finger), followed by F# (index finger), and then E (long finger).
- Perform the crann on the beat.
 - This exercise is quite similar to 'The Worm'.
 - If executing the crann feels challenging at this moment, practice The Worm more slowly and gradually increase the metronome's BPM.
- Experiment with performing cranns on other notes.

8. Chromatics

Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_ocMhWXU7w

Purpose: Understand where all notes are and be able to find them quickly.

Credit: Markus Tullberg (Who got it from Anders Ljungar-Chapelon) - Malmö, Sweden 2015

- Start a metronome of your preference.
 - Aim for a steady and clear tone throughout all exercises.
- Play D and ascend chromatically up to F#.
 - You can play 1, 2, or even 4 notes per beat.
- Play from F# chromatically back down to D.
 - The sequence is as follows: D D# E F F# F E D# D
- Repeat the same from D# to G.
- Take a deep breath (without making a sound).
- Return from G back to D#.
 - This sequence is: D# E F F# G F# F E D#
- Continue in the same manner from E through all the notes of the instrument.
 - Eventually, you will be able to play both octaves up and down fluidly, like running water.

9. Major Scales

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RD4WDTkQz0Y>

Purpose: Become familiar with all 12 major keys.

Credit: Markus Tullberg - Malmö, Sweden 2015

The tunes are the Swedish traditional tune; 'Träskodansen' (The Clog Dance) and a very popular Irish polka; 'Britches Full of Stitches'.

- Learn one or both of these tunes by heart in G major.
 - The last note in Träskodansen becomes the first note when the tune is played in C major.
- Master the tune in C major, then proceed to F major, and so on.
 - The tune follows a counter-clockwise path around the circle of fifths.
- Visualize the circle to form a mental image of your current position and your intended direction.
- Apply the same process to the polka.
 - It travels the circle in a clockwise direction.

10. Scales

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5f5ba442cgl>

Purpose: Understand which notes are in which keys and build muscle memory.

Credit: Jon Antonsson

Choose a key that is the most beneficial for you at this moment. Perhaps you've learned a tune in a specific key. Even though we rarely play in, for example, Eb, Db, or F# during sessions.

Practising these keys can boost your confidence. Knowing the scales is like engine oil; it smoothens everything up.

Naturally, minor keys work the same way in this exercise. In the previous exercise, we played all major keys. Practice those keys you feel uncertain about and transform that uncertainty into confidence.

Use the metronomes and the drones as tools.

- Start the 60 BPM Metronome and a drone in the key of your choice.
 - In the video I demonstrate D Major.
 - Choose your own difficulty level by deciding how many notes per beat you want to play.
- Play: D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#, D, E, D, C#, B, A, G, F#, E (then restart on F#)
 - And then the same pattern from E. And so on.
 - When you reach the end, as in the video, you can do a triad within the key you are practising.
- Do the same pattern with other keys you want and need to practice.
 - For Example: E-minor: E, F#, G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, E, D, C, B, A, G, F#.
- Try out all sorts of different scales.
 - Always listen to the instrument.
 - Be humble and kind towards yourself. (And others)
 - Try to be aware of everything you do when you play.
 - Let the melodies come to life through you.

11. Thoughts & All Exercises

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOyp6L0urhw>

Purpose: Get inspired and learn to practice efficiently.

Credit: Jon Antonsson

- Learn as many simple standard tunes as possible, by picking them up by ear.
- Break down each tune into manageable phrases.
 - If you encounter a challenging part, 'zoom in' on that specific spot and apply some 'motor oil' to smooth out the passage.
 - 'Zoom' out and make sure that the newly oiled section harmonizes within its context.
- Play the tunes both with and without ornaments.
 - Even though there's nothing wrong with incorporating ornaments, it's good to be aware of any 'involuntary' ornamentations or articulations that may arise.
- Be kind to yourself if you're unsure about the 'correct' placement of all ornaments.
 - The key is to have fun and acknowledge your awareness. That mindset takes you a long way!
- Once you've established the foundation of the tune, experiment by adding or removing ornaments in different sections.
 - Feel free to exaggerate or understate the melody.
 - Be creative, take liberties, and introduce variations to the tune.
 - Extend a note where there are usually many, and vice versa.
 - Twist the tune inside out until you've crafted 'your own' version of it.

Traditional music is alive and constantly changing and I believe that traditions should continue to evolve and therefore:

- Let the tunes find their unique place within your musical realm.