L
ike a packrat collecting shiny
treasures, I look for teaching
ideas in many places. It seemed a
good idea to borrow vocalises from the
studios of vocal teachers, because they
need only a little adapting to be suit-
able for the flute. Similar to our long
tones, singing teachers often begin les-
sons with vocalizations that consist of
short melodic patterns that are repeat-
ed in chromatic sequence. The teacher
usually accompanies the vocalises with
simple supportive harmonies.
This opening routine allows the
teacher to assess a student's vocal
health and readiness to sing other
repertoire. It is also a good time to
address basic technical matters, such as
posture, breathing, and breath man-
agement, before working on music that
has the additional complications of
rhythm and diction. An especially
appealing aspect of vocalization is that
it is a dual effort, a collaborative intro-
duction to the lesson that sets the
mood and energy level for the work to
come. Because I like to begin flute les-
sons with a brief activity that allows
both musical and conversational inter-
action with students, I simply added a
second part to the melodic patterns of
the vocalises on the following page so
that two flutists could play them; I call
them "duo-warmups".
When used to teach fundamental
skills such as breathing, hand position,
and posture, the duos can be played
without the lower part, so that atten-
tion can be given to the student's per-
formance. I find that these warm-ups
are especially helpful as intonation
exercises when both parts are played.
Sometimes I ask students to identify
unisons, fifths, and octaves between
the two parts. We add fermatas to
those notes, so that we can pause to
listen to the intonation.
We also observe how intonation is
affected by the key. Keys with C# or D♭
as the tonic or dominant, for instance,
require special care. In collaborative
music making, compromise is some-
times the best approach. Working with
a tuner is an important and necessary
skill for students to learn, but playing
with other musicians requires flexibili-
ty and sensitivity, not to mention tact.
Those skills can be learned only by
playing with real people, not
machines. The duo-warm-ups provide
an opportunity to listen attentively to
a partner while matching pitch, color,
and dynamics.
Recently I added a new twist to the
duos and asked my students to com-
pose their own. Those who had not
notated a musical idea before learned
to write the transposed versions of
their duos with clearly marked acci-
dentals and a legible manuscript.
Students with access to a piano
wrote a lower part for their duos, and I
helped the others add a satisfying sec-
ond part. Then I compiled the stu-
dents' duos into a set and distributed
them for use in our lessons. As we
incorporated the new duos into les-
sions, the students experienced the
pride of knowing that their composi-
tions are now part of the communal
studio duo repertoire to be enjoyed
and studied by their peers.
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