

The longevity and playability of new flutes

by Jennifer Cluff, June 2007

Every few weeks, on Flutenet or some of the other internet discussion groups for flute, someone asks whether they should buy "x" brand flute, and what the pros and cons are of all the available flute brands. Usually several flute professionals will try to give an overview of brands with the background of experience that this or that brands is generally reliable. Flute teachers always remind you that you will need flute-shopping assistance from an excellent flute tester (your private teacher, or a nearby professional flutist who will play-test the flutes for you), because there are no two flutes alike. Every flute needs to be individually checked for flaws or limitations. However, several amateurs or students often muddy the issue by emailing to say: "I play a 'y-brand' special artist flute with gold lip plate, and have played it for seven years, and it's fantastic!". This can leave the original question-asker confused.

And it can be frustrating for the flute professionals who, through their work, are acquainted with a far larger number of flute brands and have a day to day experience of the playability/longevity of certain brands. Flute professionals actually have compared and contrasted various brands in their studios, watching for decades how certain brands hold up, how frequent the repair requirements are, and how various students develop using certain flutes. Flute teachers and professionals actually have a more realistic knowledge base because they teach and play at a higher level which demands a better-made flute.

But, because of the democratic nature of these discussion groups, it would be rude to say to the amateur or student who loves their "Emerson, Bundy, Vito, DeFord, Artley, Gemeinhardt" or other student-flute: "I'm sorry, but you only know YOUR level of playing, not the level of 30 students a year over thirty years, which is a far greater pool of flute testing!"

So I thought I'd create a chart that explains why you want to take a flute-expert's advice in choosing a new or used flute when flute-shopping.

The key to buying a flute is to purchase one that will not hold you back IF you develop into a fine flutist. There is nothing more frustrating than the common problem of thinking that YOU are not a good flute player, when in fact the instrument is halting your development.

How can a poorly made flute halt your development?

A poorly made flute can halt your development in the following ways:

- ❖ It can require frequent repair shop visits because it keeps coming out of adjustment due to soft metal or mis-aligned mechanical moving parts
- ❖ It can have a headjoint cut that makes you sound rough and breathy in tone
- ❖ It can have slow keys that are uneven when they rise and fall
- ❖ It can be heavy and clunky
- ❖ It can limit your ability to play with dynamics and tone colours
- ❖ It can be difficult to play in tune. *See the following chart for more information.*

Pros and Cons of flutes to consider when flute shopping.

	Good Flute	Okay Flute	Poor Flute
Price	\$900- \$10,000	\$800 - \$3000	\$50 - \$600
Resale value	\$600- \$9000 Yes, you will get most of your money back minus the cost of repairs/upkeep. After 5-8 yrs of use, expect to get 2/3rds of what you paid if flute is well-maintained	\$500 - \$1500 Because the flute breaks down during use, you will be unlikely to get more than half of what you paid. A full overhaul is needed before resale, typically.	\$0 - \$150 Because the flute will be almost unplayable by the time you've used it for a year or two, it will be difficult to sell. May become a lamp or wall ornament.
Cost of yearly repairs	\$80-\$200 per year for upkeep	\$50-\$250 per year for upkeep and repair	\$100-\$300 year for difficult repairs
Metal hardness for durability	Metal is hard and durable. Will not bend when carefully used. Accurate machining means repairs hold.	Metal may be a bit soft and machined parts not completely finished nor fitted. May need yearly tweaking at repair shop.	Metal is soft and will not stay in adjustment during normal use. Flute will start to leak within 1-6 weeks, and be difficult to keep in adjustment.
Pads ability to seal over time	Pads sealing good for 1-5 years.	Pad sealing good for 1 year.	Pads start leaking almost immediately.
Tone Quality	Excellent tone in all three octaves.	Tone good but may have one weak octave.	Tone is consistently poor. Poorly cut headjoint.
Speed of keys when fingering	Scales can be played at high speeds with utmost clarity. Leaping large intervals easy.	Scales can be played at moderate speeds. Leaping is often difficult.	Fingering feels slow and labourious. Leaping intervals is difficult.
Damage Repair after accidents	If dropped or bent, can be completely repaired.	If damaged, can be repaired somewhat.	Cannot be repaired easily after accidents.
Repair after mishandling	If mishandled over time, through rough handling, can still be completely repaired.	If keys are bent during handling, may not be able to be completely repaired.	Keys bend easily, rods bend easily. Repair shops may refuse to work on it as repairs will not hold.
Dynamic ability	Flute can be played at all dynamics easily once student has learned techniques.	Flute may play too loud and rough and be difficult to control, or too soft and diffuse.	Flute has very small dynamic range due to a poorly cut embouchure hole.
Can be played in tune with dynamics	Flute can be played in tune quite easily at all dynamic levels	Difficult to play in tune at all dynamics. Student struggles with ff and pp.	Very difficult to play in tune. Few dynamics possible. Very little variation in tone.
Can be used for an advanced player or for all levels	All levels of players will find this flute easy to play well. Intermediate players will find everything "easy" to accomplish.	Advanced players will become frustrated quickly with this flute's limitations.	Even beginners will soon become frustrated with this flute within several months.

<p>Can be upgraded with a more professional headjoint</p>	<p>Adding a professional hand-cut headjoint of your choice will custom tailor this flute to accomplish the sound and control you'll want as a professional.</p>	<p>Adding a better headjoint of your choice will upgrade this flute to make it last another two years or more as you continue to advance.</p>	<p>No matter what headjoint you add, the slowness of the body to respond well makes the flute continually frustrating.</p>
<p>Frequency of repair visits</p>	<p>Yearly visits to repair needed for clean, oil and adjust. Professional flutists who play 3-6 hrs. a day may send flute for repairs more frequently, and keep a back-up flute for this purpose.</p>	<p>Yearly visits to repair needed for clean, oil and adjust. If left longer, the pads will start to leak noticeably, and hand/arm pain may indicate that the student has been thumping the keys to play.</p>	<p>You will likely find the flute has become unplayable in a very short time: 2-6 weeks. Repair shops may refuse to work on this instrument as repairs will not hold.</p>
<p>Flute player's perception</p>	<p>"This flute will allow me to advance as fast as humanly possible with time, patience, and intelligent work."</p>	<p>"The better I get the more I realize that this flute is holding me back. I tried my teacher's flute and everything was MUCH easier to accomplish!"</p>	<p>This flute has frustrated my efforts to play well ever since I got it. Every day there is a new frustration!</p>
<p>Typical brands; you may find 1 in every 5 to be excellent for your needs.</p>	<p>Azumi, Altus, Burkart, Muramatsu, Nagahara, Miyazawa, Sankyo, Japanese-made Yamaha, Several independent flute makers.</p>	<p>Pearl, Trevor James, DiMedici, used Yamahas (Japanese made) and other intermediate flutes that are pre-tested and then recommended by specialty flute shops.</p>	<p>NONE Flute teachers advise never buying a non-recommended brand from ebay or from a chain department store.</p>
<p>Possible brands (you may find 1/300 that is decent enough to purchase)</p>	<p>USED flutes from the above brands, and other pre-tested quality brands from dealers such as www.fluteworld.com or other specialty flute shops. These shops test and choose among flute brands to increase their own reputations for quality. Ask your private teacher to help pick from among many.</p>	<p>Sonare, Emerson, Artley, DeFord, Buffet, Armstrong, Gemeinhardt. Be sure and have a professional flutist fully test these flutes fully before purchase. Sonare should be a better flute, but early inconsistency in the brand has led to unreliability.</p>	<p>These "unknown" brands are not recommended by any flute teachers as they do not last. Their names are constantly changing, (Lark, Sky etc.) but usually the advert is translated and sounds very strange in English. If you wish to purchase a cheap and reliable flute, buy a very old used Yamaha (Japanese made) and have it fully repaired.</p>