

Poulenc's *Sonata for Flute and Piano*

By [Francesca Arnone](#)

This year's required repertoire for the FFA's High School Young Artist Competition is one of our most beloved staples of the flute repertoire, the *Sonata for Flute and Piano* by Francis Poulenc. Like all great works, I hope you find this piece to be a joy to discover and return to again and again throughout your journey as a flutist.

As my students will attest, I always encourage starting from the score even when first learning a piece. Since this is a sonata, this is a chamber work – a conversation between the flute and the piano – with the piano being more than just “accompaniment” but an equal partner. Beyond that awareness, it's crucial to be aware of the rhythmic, melodic and harmonic material occurring as you play. If you haven't cracked open the piano part yet, start today!

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) was an important French composer who was commissioned by US patrons to write a flute sonata (1957). The 1994 edition edited by Patricia Harper offers valuable historical insight to the piece which are presented in the piano score. Having some background information often provides more meaning and context to our playing, so take a few minutes to read these notes presented in the piano score and also listen to some other works by Poulenc, especially the *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano*, featuring some of the same motivic gestures in the first movement.

- I. Allegretto *malinconico* (note the misprint – not “malincolico,” but the Italian word for melancholy, malinconico)

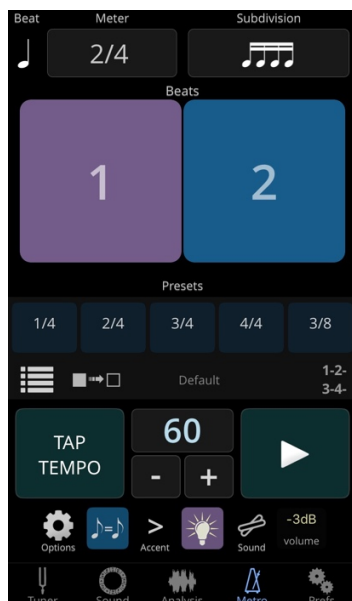
This movement constantly shifts between states of melancholy (minor), defined as a very personal state of sadness with perhaps no apparent reason and glimpses of hopeful sunshine (major). Bring these qualities to life through pacing and exploration of tone color.

While I'm all in for making a beautiful line - and this piece is full of beautiful lines! – let's start with the rhythm. Following my advice above, notice the right hand of the piano plays a nearly constant 16th-note motor up until circle 7, which prepares the B theme starting in circle 8. (More on this later.) This groove is the life-blood of the movement so embrace it without the flute. Divide the flute line from the beginning of the piece into eighth notes: the pickup 32nds = one eighth note; the e quarter note in m. 1 = two eighth notes, followed by eighth notes, etc. Here's a photo with the eighth notes written into the score to help:



The flute part rhythm looks far more complicated than it is: notice where the notes in m. 2 and m. 3 line up in comparison to the notes in the right hand of the piano. For example, looking at the score shows you exactly where to place that C# trilled note on the “and” of 2 in m. 2.

Set your metronome to sound 16ths at quarter = 60 to start. If your metronome can, set the time signature for two beats per bar:



For now, omit the pickup to the first measure. With your “groove” going, sing/chant/bop out the flute part rhythm without regard for pitches and without your flute, through the G natural in m. 4. Do this a few times until it feels solid. If it does not, slow the metronome down. Strive to lock into the 16th notes. Make sure your eighth notes fit with the rate of 16ths so that you enter after the eighth rests in time and are not late and your tied notes are the correct length.

Now try adding the 32nd note pick-up gesture. Notice those notes occupy the equivalent of an eighth note. For starters, use just the first note as a pickup into the downbeat with the groove to practice creating the motion of the pick-up. Now add some kind of nonsensical syllables (*scabadaba, diggidiggi*, or a real word like *revolution*) to sing for your pick up and add that into the mix over the groove track. Do all of this while looking at the score. Now notice the sweeping scale 7-let into m. 5. Surprise - it's with the piano! Be aware this fills an eighth note, so it's critical to place the first note (C) clearly and aim for an equally clear downbeat arrival (another C) in m. 5, preparing the "answer" part of this phrase. Try singing just m. 4 with the metronome groove going, then start in m. 4 and sing/groove until circle 1. You've just completed the first phrase which now is restated, for the most part, until m. 12. While the melodic and harmonic material (notes) are different to form a complete period, the rhythms remain the same which creates a satisfying conclusion. Look carefully at the piano material, m. 16-18. Know this well (instead of just counting your rests) to ensure entering at the melodic handoff for your next entrance in circle 2.

Time to play! Going back to the opening and without the metronome, try slowly playing the simple version of the melody. Omit the first bar and only play notes on the beats: E, D#, D natural. Continuing from here, play the notes on the eighth notes: C#, C natural, B, A#, G#, G natural. Play these all slurred and connected without any rests. Exaggerate the connection, leaning into the chromaticism. Have more energy on the D# to lead to the D natural. Apply this to the G# and lead to the G natural. Do you hear the continuous direction from the E in m. 1 all the way to the G in m. 4? Great! Now add the rests (no trills yet) in your melody but work to achieve the same sense of line. If you are satisfied, add all of the notes and trills (which create extra energy forward). Listen for the melancholy of this opening minor theme, balanced by the octave scale swoosh up to m. 5 with a glimpse of sunshine (major) before returning to the colors of melancholy.

A few words about the pickup: of all notes, we have the *opportunity* to start this piece off on a high E. I finger this without the right-hand pinky to make it more stable and often vent RH2 (place my finger on the ring to not cover the tone hole). Experiment to find something comfortable for you. Cracking the first trill key slightly may be an option but I find the color to be a little false. A slight "pooh" articulation, tongue more between the lips, may help a clear beginning to the note. The trick is to be stable lower in the body and free in the face, jaw, neck and fingers in particular. Michel Debost taught starting this movement by exhaling a slight amount of air through the nose simultaneously or even slightly before blowing.

While I've discussed the importance of rhythm, the movement can and should "breathe." The first statement of the pickup can be played while taking a little bit of time, since this is the initial appearance of the motive. I prefer lingering a little on the E to solidify the octave in the beginning (first note into the downbeat of m. 1) the first time but after that I try to keep it smoother rhythmically. Focusing on a lips-forward approach will also create more ease throughout these intervals. Also, since the pick-up gesture permeates the movement, allow some time for the previous phrase to settle in the piano (often) before dashing off in the flute (often) to start the next. This takes practice to find a sense of balance – how to not be late, but

also not present a run-on sentence...that is the challenge! Listen to a variety of excellent recordings and study the score to design your game plan.

Particular technical challenges: m. 45-49 are measures I practice slurred and sustained for smoothness and ease. Try slurring the first two notes in m. 45, using more energy in the airstream and body for the first note to prepare the second. Apply this to the next two notes, and the next pair (the same as the first), the next and continue throughout this passage. Then try slurring by groups of four, "parking" or sustaining the first of each group and playing much lighter on the remaining three notes. This is particularly helpful in m. 45, 46 and 48. Make sure you carry all the accidentals: for example, each G in m. 45 is Gb!

For articulation ease, practice single tonguing this passage clearly and also practice playing it using just the "back stroke" or ku/gu. It is very helpful to practice double tonguing on other material than this passage. Play your scales with two notes per pitch, practice arpeggios in particular the same way. Try playing broken arpeggios or thirds in any key to gain comfort in playing intervals, two per pitch. To gain even more confidence in this passage, find exercises using these pitches from Taffanel and Gaubert, Reichert Daily Exercises and other collections.

Moving on to the B section at circle 8, one of the greatest challenges here is executing the rhythms correctly and with ease and beauty of line. Once again, I encourage looking at the rhythms first to avoid having to fix and unlearn errors. Check out the right hand in the piano, our elegant and supportive metronome. I often practice playing out the subdivisions and starting out in m. 73, I would play the first beat divided into 32nd notes: six F's, a G and an A. The rest of the measure demands 14 G's (tied 2nd beat into the third beat dotted eighth note), an A and a Bb. That's a lot to count! A simpler and less headache-prone way is to play 16th notes:

The image shows a musical score for a 3/4 measure starting at circle 8. The top staff is a treble clef with a 3/4 time signature. It begins with a circled '8' and a dynamic marking 'f'. The melody consists of a series of notes: a dotted quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, and a dotted quarter note, all slurred together. The notes are F, G, A, and Bb. The middle staff is a piano accompaniment with a dynamic marking 'mf'. It consists of two chords: a triad of F, A, and C, and a triad of G, Bb, and D. The bottom staff is a bass clef with a 3/4 time signature. It consists of a single line of notes: a dotted quarter note, an eighth note, and a quarter note, all slurred together. The notes are F, G, and A.

Playing the subdivisions with direction can really teach us to maintain the energy on sustained notes while executing the rhythm correctly. Try doing this throughout this passage to really understand and embrace the elegance of this melody when played as written.

II. Cantilena

While just 65 measures, this movement is one of my most favorite things to play. A *cantilena* is a lyrical melody, from *cantare*, Italian for “to sing.” Once again the colors of this movement are like the clouds shifting in the sky, creating different possibilities of the sun’s rays to filter to us.

I like to think of the first two movements as a highly-compact composite of the piece, starting off in canon with the piano but ending together. Practice playing the piano part on the flute to understand your entrance beyond counting rests. Consider directing m. 1 into m. 2 so that the arrival blooms over the barline but the energy in the phrase transforms on the F, allowing the Gb to be more of a question.

Keep this first statement simple and pure through circle 1. Note the ostinato piano rhythm of eighth notes throughout this movement. Although written in common time, it is helpful to consider this movement as “one per bar” to reinforce the idea of simplicity and avoid emphasizing additional beats. Practice this melody over a sustained reference tone (F for m. 3-4 to reinforce those F octaves, and more importantly over Bb for m. 3-6). Take the initiative to look at the score and figure out other possibilities to explore with this useful approach.

These are just a few quick ideas to help you in your preparation of this terrific piece. I hope you choose to play this work and enter the FFA’s competition. It’s a fantastic opportunity and motivational goal! I used repertoire for the FFA high school competition for my college auditions and feel this is an excellent choice for that use or recital option. Good luck and happy practicing to all!

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