The Wide World of Alexander Murray

The Lifetime Achievement Award recipient began career networking while sailing on a ship to South Africa. He was among the early founders of the NFA because he saw a need for a "flutist support group."

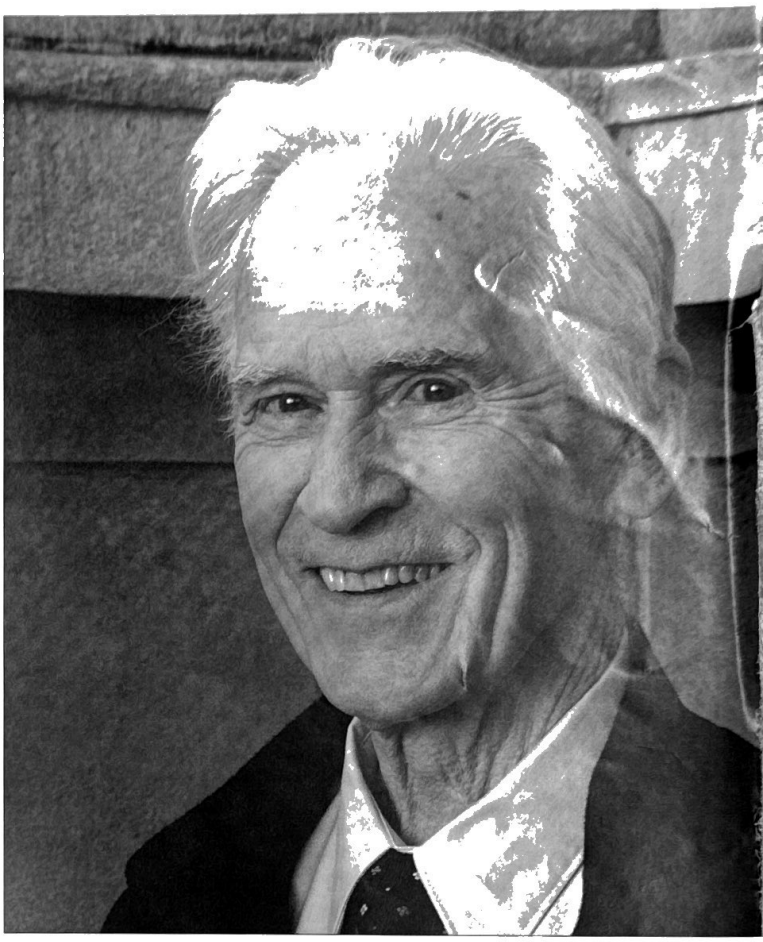
by Zart Dombourian-Eby

Alexander Murray's deep and varied career spans 75 years of involvement in music. He has been principal flutist in several of the major London orchestras; professor of flute both in England, the Netherlands, and the United States; an early proponent of Alexander Technique and its application to music; an explorer and innovator in the construction and acoustics of the flute; and, most lately, a disciple of Tai Chi. He was also deeply involved in the National Flute Association from its very earliest days and is still actively pursuing and investigated acoustical, scholarly, and performing interests.

You had an interesting childhood and path to the flute.
My lifelong interest in the flute was sown in me by my mother, who could play on the piano any melody she heard, and by my father, who introduced me to the penny whistle as soon as I could hold one. Musical curiosity pushed me in my mother's direction and I discovered very early how to play tunes "by ear" on the piano as well as on the penny whistle.

Zart Dombourian-Eby

In the window of the local music shop was a wooden recorder, which I coveted but could never afford (it would have cost six months' pocket money). It seemed to me, at age 10, the most superior form of penny whistle. Opportunity knocked in June 1940 with the advent of World War II. By this time, however, the recorder had taken second place in my affections to a wooden fife.



Alexander Murray

Believing invasion to be imminent, the British Government had initiated a scheme to evacuate children. My parents arranged for me to live with my aunt in South Africa. Prior to my departure, I did the rounds of my hometown relations collecting pocket money for the journey. I concealed enough of the money from my parents to purchase the much-coveted fife. I remember sitting on my bed, trying to elicit a tune from it and pretending it was just one of my penny whistles.

On the ship to South Africa, with 300 other children, we gathered every evening for a sing-along, which I accompanied on the fife or whistle. By the time we arrived in Cape Town I was able to play both instruments with equal facility. As we had cases of measles on board, we were kept in quarantine at the Governor General's House. During this period, the Municipal Cape Town Orchestra played for us. I spoke to the youngest member of the flute section, a 21-year-old Englishman, David Sandeman. "I play the flute, too" was my opening line. He asked me to show him my instrument—very different from his—and invited me to visit him when I settled in with my aunt and uncle.

After my first visit and lesson, I was in possession of a real flute, the one on which David had started his career. I was invited weekly for a free lesson, which was always concluded with tea and donuts in the company of his mother! David returned after the war to become principal flute in the London

3:15–3:50 pm
Washington 4
WS

Youth Flute Day: Improvisation 101 with Greg and Ali

Ali Ryerson and Greg Pattillo will bring Youth Flute Day to a fun-filled finale with their workshop, encouraging young flutists to bring their musical personality into their own improvisations. *Open to convention attendees as auditors, as room allows.*

4:00–6:00 pm
Salons 1,2,3
C

One World: Gala Concert and Closing Ceremonies

Our final concert brings together artists from many different backgrounds and countries. Featuring the International Superflutes Collective, NFA Professional Flute Choir, the U.S. Army Field Band with solo performances by Carl Hall, Sarah Frisof, Katayoon Hodjati, and Sean Owen, and two favorite piccolo showpieces. We close with announcements and J.S. Bach's Air in D Major as we say farewell until we see you in San Diego!

Philharmonic. Many years later, he gave my wife an account of my lessons with him. I was his first pupil ever, and he was under the impression that there was nothing to teaching the flute: you told the student what needed to be done and he came back the following week doing it. It wasn't until his second student that he discovered that there was more to it!

After a year in Cape Town, I moved to Johannesburg, and I was musically on my own. Then David's orchestra came to town for an opera season, and we renewed our friendship. He introduced me to a professor of music at a local university, who asked me, at age 13, to play in the university orchestra.

When I returned to Great Britain at the end of the war, I entered the Royal College of Music and finished my degree in one year, after which I was immediately drafted into the Royal Air Force, at age 18.

Murray later attended the Paris Conservatory, where he won first prize, and soon became principal flutist of the London Symphony and Covent Garden Opera and taught at many of England's top conservatories.

You were a trailblazer in introducing the Alexander Technique to the playing of musical instruments and to the U.S. as well. Could you tell me how all of this came to be?

(Editor's Note: Alexander Technique, developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander in the early 20th century, is a system of mind-body re-education aimed at awareness of "the use of self.")

In 1954, I was principal flutist of the Royal Opera, a strenuous occupation entailing long rehearsals. Performances were every evening plus an afternoon performance on Saturday. During the rehearsals in the orchestra pit, a cold breeze blew frequently through the theatre while the scenery was transported from the street to the stage, and I had a tendency to bronchitis. A friend suggested that Charles Neal, a member of F.M. Alexander's first teacher-training course, might be able to help with my respiratory problems.

I took lessons from Neil over a period of several years. However, what I learned then was not what I now understand to be the Alexander Technique: Neal had extensively modified the technique to be more of a variety of relaxation methods and exercises. After Neal's death in 1958, I took lessons with Walter Carrington, who had been F.M. Alexander's principal assistant. This is when my true Alexander lessons finally began. It was the beginning of a process of change in my conception of the Alexander Technique, my use, and—of course—my breathing.

My earliest recollections of applying what I was learning about the Alexander Technique to flute playing was to rid the mind of "taking a breath" to play. This continues to be an important aspect of all my practicing. If I wish to play a long phrase, I first exhale, then allow the breath to return (through the nostrils, silently) and then play when the breath is ready to move out. When playing continuously, I always take time to breathe, even if it means stopping the flow of the music. Naturally, this applies to practicing only—when performing, one does what the music requires with whatever means one has at the time.

Paris Conservatoire, 1951, with Alexander Murray at the piano and Gaston Crunelle seated next to him. Maxence Larrieu holds the flute.

In 2012, Ann Yeung and Alexander Murray reprised their decades-old "Tao of Bach" performance featuring selections from the Goldberg Variations.

Besides a multitude of influences on breathing, Alexander Technique has also led me to examine motion of the jaw and balance of the entire body. I realized that the jaw moves not only as a hinge but also like a cradle; it slides forward and back (and in other directions as well). When it slides, it changes the distribution of weight in the head. I reasoned that the center of gravity must be dependent on the mobile relationship of the upper and lower jaw. Free movement of the jaw is integral to the kind of flute playing in which I was interested.

How did you get interested in modifying the flute?

I had a flute in the Air Force on which the two G-sharp keys didn't go quite together; I read Dayton Miller about Böhm's system and how Böhm espoused an open G-sharp key, so I decided to give that a try. Subsequently, I applied the same principle to the D-sharp key, making that an "open" key as well. Then I began to think about how bad the C-sharp is, so I came up with the idea of having another hole for that. It just took off from there.

At this point, around 1959, I was working with Albert Cooper and John Coltman. I had been referred to Albert because of his ongoing experimental work with the flute. Albert made me six flutes, and then, once I moved to America, Jack Moore, at Armstrong, began making Murray flutes in 1967. Jack spent a week working with Albert, and Arthur

TOP PHOTO COURTESY ALEXANDER MURRAY; BOTTOM PHOTO BY PHILIP JOHNSTON

Benade also contributed acoustic advice, on the scale of the flute—all of which eventually led to the now-ubiquitous Cooper Scale. Jack must have made 20 experimental flutes and headjoints, most recently in 2003, for my performance of the Mozart Flute and Harp Concerto.

You were there at the very beginning of the NFA as a Founding Member. What do you recall about those times?
I thought there was a need for a kind of "support group" for flutists started by my earliest days of playing duets in South Africa. There was a whole world of flute players who were friendly and noncompetitive, and we needed an organization to help encourage camaraderie amongst us.

I remember that I wrote a long letter to Wally Kujala suggesting that we have different "branches"—early music, scholarship, and so on—and I suggested various people who I thought might want to get involved.

How do you spend your time these days?
My current "work" is enjoying the magnificent baroque flutes made with acoustic acumen by Ron Laszewski. We play baroque quartets (two flutes, harpsichord, and gamba) every Saturday—have done so for nearly 40 years—and I play 30 minutes a day on the last model Jack Moore made for me. I really enjoy playing unaccompanied Bach cello and violin music on the modern flute, but not publicly.

What do you focus on in lessons?
A typical lesson with me starts with a bit of discipline—some Taffanel and Gaubert—and then I just work with my students to play musically. I always preferred to teach musicians rather than technicians.

In practicing, I always ask that the student take time to breathe inaudibly, no matter how long, and divide the music into phrases that can be played without strain in one breath. Problems of fingering are broken down into the smallest division, moving from one note to the next. I also advise students who think they are about to make a mistake to stop; every mistake practiced is a mistake learned.

My personal approach to teaching is to accept students as they are, see in each what I think can be improved, and look for a stepwise progression in the right direction.

No matter how badly one plays, one can always play worse; this establishes the negative direction on a continuum. To move from worse to better is the immediate goal. How far is in the lap of the gods.

Zart Dombourian-Eby is president of the National Flute Association.

Editor's note: portions of Murray's comments were excerpted with permission from his article, "Grabbing the Bird by the Tale: A Flutist's History of Learning to Play," which appeared in the anthology Curiosity Recaptured, *edited by Jerry Sontag and published by Mornum Time Press.*