




# B<sup>b</sup> Thumb Key BFF

The B<sup>b</sup> Thumb Key can be the flutist's best friend when playing in flat keys. Learn to use it well!


There are three fingerings for the two lower B's (or enharmonically, A<sup>#</sup>s): 

Most flutists learn the so-called Long-B during their first lessons: 

- Long-B<sup>b</sup> is helpful for beginning flutists because thumb and RH1 can operate the most usual keys.
- Long-B<sup>b</sup> is useful for the advanced flutist in some specific circumstances and when it is not practical for the Thumb or RH1 to shift to another key.
- Of all three fingerings for B<sup>b</sup>, Long-B<sup>b</sup> is the least-used in advanced playing.

Flutists who work in flat keys soon learn the so-called Thumb-B<sup>b</sup>: 


- Thumb-B<sup>b</sup> is useful to all flutists when performing in keys of 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 flats.
- Of the three fingerings for B<sup>b</sup>, Thumb-B<sup>b</sup> is the most-used in advanced playing.


Many flutists learn the so-called Side-B<sup>b</sup> as a part of a fluid technique: 


- Side-B<sup>b</sup> is useful for music that asks for B<sup>b</sup> and C<sup>b</sup> side-by-side, or A<sup>#</sup> and B side-by-side: chromatic passages, keys of 6 or 7 flats, keys of 5 or 6 sharps, and many minor keys.
- Of the three fingerings for B<sup>b</sup>, Side-B<sup>b</sup> is the second most-used in advanced playing.

All three fingerings should be learned, because each has its own best use. Continue on to conquer Thumb-B<sup>b</sup>.

## How Thumb- B<sup>b</sup> Works

Wiggle the “normal” thumb key (). You will see that only one key opens and closes.

Wiggle the B<sup>b</sup> Thumb Key (). You will see that both thumb keys move plus a third key on the top of the flute.

Because both thumb keys move when using B<sup>b</sup> Thumb Key some fingering charts show both thumb keys closed () when using B<sup>b</sup> thumb key. There is no need to work hard to operate both keys.

Some people *do play* with thumb in the crack between the two keys when operating the B $\flat$  Thumb Key. Others put the thumb only on the B $\flat$  Thumb Key. Both options work. The comfort of your hand will tell you which is the best for you.

The important moving key is the one on top of the flute. If you move the key under RH1, you should see that also moves this key. It is this one moving key on the top of the flute (between LH1 and LH2) that is critical for producing a B $\flat$  instead of a B $\natural$ .

## Using Thumb-B $\flat$

B $\flat$  Thumb Key can be substituted for the “normal” thumb key on every note that uses thumb key except for four notes: the three B-naturals and the high-F#.



You can prove this to yourself by fingering any thumb-key note on the flute and rolling your thumb between the two thumb keys. Rolling the thumb doesn't change the position of any of the top keys of the flute except with the four notes B $\natural$ 1, B $\flat$ 2, F $\sharp$ 3, and B $\flat$ 3.

This means the B $\flat$  Thumb Key can be used freely as long as the music does not include a lot of B $\flat$ s or C $\flat$ s.

The traditional tune, *Long, Long Ago* is an excellent piece to let your thumb practice finding the B $\flat$  Thumb Key. There are no B $\flat$ s or C $\flat$ s, so place your thumb on the B $\flat$  Thumb Key before you start. Use B $\flat$  Thumb Key for all the notes that require thumb.



## Choosing to Use Thumb-B $\flat$

The best time to consider using B $\flat$  Thumb Key is in any music that has a key signature of flats. If the key signature has 1-5 flats, scan the music. If you do not see very many B's or C's, set your thumb on the B $\flat$  Thumb Key and use it as the primary thumb key for the whole piece.

The original "Etude" by J. E. Skornicka and A. C. Petersen from *Rubank Intermediate Method for Flute or Piccolo* (Rubank, 1939, p. 18) is great example of when to choose the B $\flat$  Thumb Key as the primary key for the thumb. Slurs added, MCJB.



## Proving the Usefulness of Thumb-B<sup>b</sup>

Most advanced flutists use Thumb-B<sup>b</sup> freely in flat key signatures because the action of the flute keys is smoother with this fingering than with Long-B<sup>b</sup> and Side-B<sup>b</sup>.

The best proof of this smoothness comes in music that is lyrical, and in music that has a lot left-hand technical work. Try the next few pieces with both Thumb-B<sup>b</sup> and Long-B<sup>b</sup>. You are sure to prove to yourself the usefulness of Thumb-B<sup>b</sup>.

Lyric music like this fragment of *The Swan* by Camille Saint-Saëns benefits from the simpler finger movement given by Thumb-B<sup>b</sup>.

**Adagio** (Slowly)



This original “Melody” by A. C. Petersen from *Rubank Elementary Method for Flute or Piccolo* (Rubank, 1934, p. 21) will soon demonstrate how Thumb-B<sup>b</sup> smooths out quick movements between B<sup>b</sup> and other left-hand notes. Slurs added, MCJB.



Some key signatures don't require very much use of the right hand at all. This "Legato Study" by J. E. Skornicka and A. C. Petersen from *Rubank Intermediate Method for Flute or Piccolo* (Rubank, 1939, p. 28) in the awkward key of A<sup>b</sup>-major is less formidable when using Thumb-B<sup>b</sup>.



## Working Well with Thumb-B<sup>b</sup>

Music doesn't always stay locked in a key signature. Accidentals can take out B<sup>b</sup>'s and convert them to B<sup>n</sup>'s at a moment's notice. Just because there are a few B<sup>b</sup>'s in music that has B<sup>n</sup>'s in the key signature doesn't mean that Thumb-B<sup>b</sup> is a no-go. You just have to plan!

Usually it is possible to slip off of the B<sup>b</sup> Thumb Key for a part of the time, and then return to it when the B<sup>n</sup>'s are passed.

An easy switch from one thumb key to the other can be made on a rest, a breath, or a note that doesn't need thumb key at all. With good planning, you can easily build a choreography for your thumb that sees it dancing effortlessly between the two thumb keys.

The next piece of music is by H. Voxman and Wm. Gower and comes from the great set of "Studies for Articulation" (no. 11) in *Rubank Advanced Method*, vol. 1 (Rubank, 1940, p. 50). Study it with your eyes and find the one B<sup>n</sup> in the music. With all the B<sup>b</sup>'s in this music, you want to be able to use Thumb-B<sup>b</sup> as much as possible. Still, you have to be off of the B<sup>b</sup> Thumb Key for the one B<sup>n</sup>.

Take advantage of the thumb-up fingering of the Cs before and after the B<sup>b</sup>. Your thumb is up on the C just before. Swing it sideways to take the regular thumb key for the B<sup>b</sup>. Lift your thumb up for the C just after. Swing it back to take the B<sup>b</sup> Thumb Key for the rest of the music. Give it a go!

**Moderato**

Many flutists find it helpful to mark the changes of thumb position for themselves in the music. Each flutist adopts a personal way to make these annotations. I have seen flutists use:

B Thumb Key On	B Thumb Key Off
+	o
O	∅
Th	Th
T	X

For myself, I use *Thon* (Thumb On), and *Thoff* (Thumb Off). It's scribbly, but it works for me.

You will find your own best way to mark the changes.

The next one is tricky, but fun to play. It is also from Voxman and Gower, *Advanced Method for Flute*, vol. 1 (no. 13, pg. 50). Study it with your eyes first, plan your thumb choreography, and make your markings.

Musical score for a flute exercise in B $\flat$  major, 6/8 time. The score consists of three staves of music. The first staff starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and ends with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic. The second staff starts at measure 6 with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The third staff starts at measure 12 with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic. The music features eighth-note patterns and slurs.

And finally, a last study. This athletic ditty comes from H. Voxman's *Rubank Advanced Method*, vol. 2 (no. 6, Rubank, 1954, pg 51). Enjoy!

Musical score for a flute exercise in B $\flat$  major, 2/4 time. The score consists of three staves of music. The first staff starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic and ends with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The second staff starts at measure 10 with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The third staff starts at measure 18 with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The music features eighth-note patterns and slurs.