

# A Beginner's Guide to Playing the Kaval

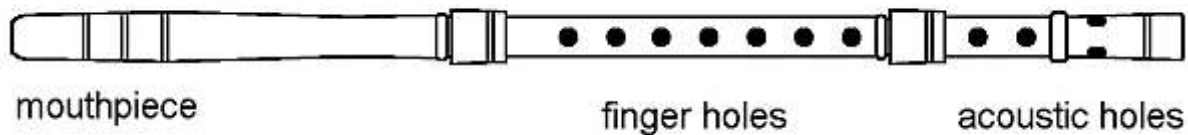
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## Playing the Kaval

Learning to play the kaval can be very frustrating, and many people probably give up too soon. Most of the difficulty is in making a tone at all. There is no windway or channel at the mouth end as in recorders or whistles, so you have to use your lips to direct the air against the tube in such a way that it speaks. Training your lips takes some practice, but it will seem natural and become easy when you get it.

All the following instructions are for a right-handed player, who will usually play the kaval with the left hand above the right, and the pipe directed from the mouth to the right side of the body. If you are left-handed, or wish to play on the other side, reverse right and left in these instructions.

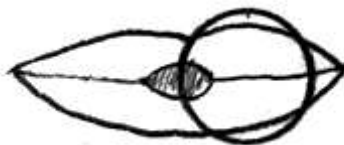


I don't profess to be an expert on the kaval. These instructions work for me, and have helped other people. The techniques described are what I personally do, and may not be the way a knowledgeable instructor would teach you. Again, it is best to get personal instruction.

## Making a Sound

This is the hardest part for a beginner. Don't give up when you can't make it speak the first time. It may take an hour to make your first note; it may take a week. If you persist, you will find it becoming easier than you ever imagined and you will astound your friends.

The mouthpiece of the kaval is the beveled end; it is farthest from any of the finger holes. Keep your lips closed for now and place the mouthpiece over the right side of your lips as shown in the enclosed diagram. (Note that this diagram shows how things would look if you looked in a mirror.) The circle of the mouth tube should touch both upper and lower lips.



Here's a way to find the approximate angle to blow. Sit in a chair with your feet on the floor. Hold the kaval to your mouth and also so the lower part of the pipe is touching the outside of your right thigh. If you keep your head so you look straight forward, but down at your knees, you should have about the right blowing angle. Of course, this is just to help you find the angle; when you learn to play, you will hold the kaval up so you could watch people dancing while you play. In this position, the pipe is not parallel to the floor, but angles down a little, but it always is pointed a bit to the right side.

Don't worry about covering any tone holes now, just leave them open. You want to blow a small round stream of air over the bevel somewhere between 8 o'clock and 10 o'clock on the tube as you look at it. The

stream is directed at an angle against the bevel, so you are not blowing straight down the tube, but diagonally across it towards your left side.

Blow softly, but move the tube angle around and open your mouth more or close it down to try and make a tone. Think of making a round pencil-like air stream with your lips. Think of making an "oo" shape with your lips (as if you were saying "oo"). Try making your lips as if you were going to whistle. In fact, you don't need to blow harder than it would take to whistle softly. Be sure to keep the end in contact with both your upper and lower lips, but you don't have to press hard.

Try different positions, blowing pressure, angle, size of lip opening, and shape (keep thinking "oo") until you get a tone. It's difficult to describe in writing, and not that easy to explain in person. The most common mistake is not making an "oo" shape with your lips. (If you have ever played a transverse flute, the lip embouchure needed for that type of flute will not work on a kaval.)

Your first notes will probably be soft and squeaky, and you may get a low or a high note. That's because the same fingering can result in up to four different notes, depending on blowing pressure and other lip action. Once you get something, work on keeping it going and try to remember what you are doing with your lips. Blow softer or harder and see if another note pops up. Try closing a few finger holes to see what happens. You will probably get a note and lose it, and become frustrated. Don't give up. If you persist, it will quickly become natural. It may help to have another instrument like a piano around to help you determine which note you are sounding.

If you can make a good note with no finger holes covered, but things fall apart when you try to cover holes, you may have a "leak" in one of the holes. Try pressing each finger harder on the flute or rocking them from side to side. Work down the flute from the upper holes in this; a leak in one of the upper holes will mess everything up below them.

## Making a Sound Checklist

- Make an "oo" shape with your lips, a pencil of air.
- Blow softly -- enough to softly whistle.
- Most of the tube touches your lips, both upper and lower.
- Blow between 8 and 10 o'clock as you look at the end.
- Vary the angle of the pipe around.
- Don't try to cover many holes at first.

## Fingering

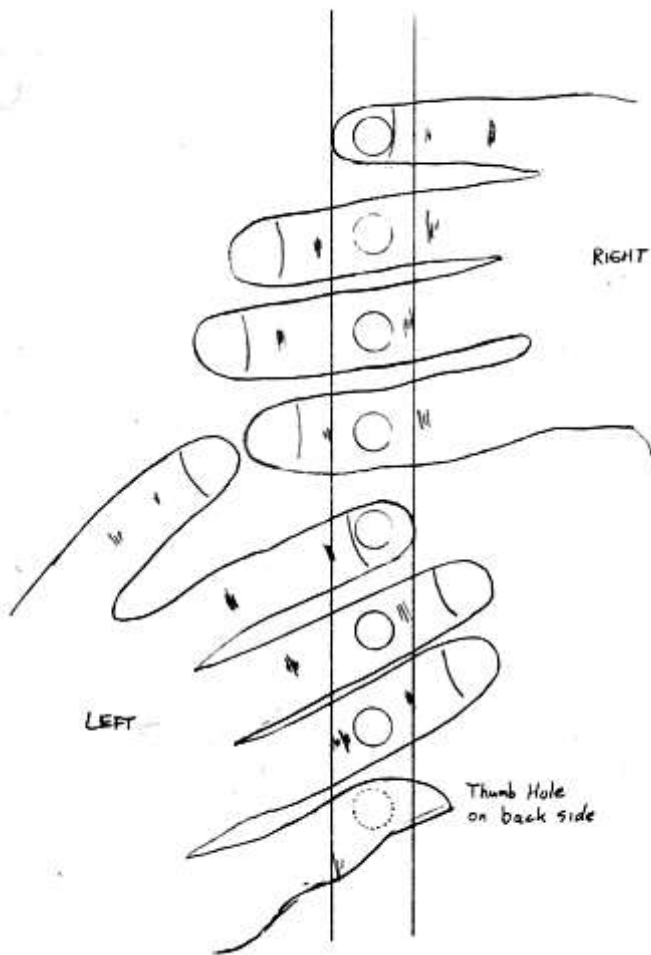
Here is a diagram showing the position of the hands for playing the kaval.

The kaval has 8 total finger holes, including the thumb hole on the back of the instrument. The four holes on the bottom-most joint are for acoustic purposes and are never covered.

Most right-handed people play with the right hand below the left. This is not a rule (except maybe in Bulgarian folk conservatory), so if the other way suits you, fine. The thumb of the left hand covers the single hole on the back of the instrument. The next three fingers of the left hand cover the three topmost holes on the front. The left pinkie dangles in the air or rests against the side of the flute.

You don't use the tips or pads of your fingers to cover most of the holes. Rather, you use the flat part between the joints just above the fingertip. For the left hand, the ring finger covers its hole with the fingertip. The second and third fingers cover their holes with the flat parts. When you have the left fingers on their holes correctly, all the fingers should be almost straight, not curved, and the ring finger pad will be on its hole, and the flats for the other two fingers on theirs. The thumb is sort of on the side of its pad, in order for the other fingers to line up and be comfortable. This position may seem strange and difficult at first, but it is integral to ornamentation on the kaval.

The right thumb just supports the kaval on the underside. The other four right fingers cover the remaining four finger holes on the front, with the right pinkie on the lowest finger hole. The pinkie will cover its hole with its pad, but the other three fingers are on the flats.



## Fingering Chart and Registers

- [Chart for the first, second, and third registers](#)
- [Chart for the high fourth register](#)

This kaval uses the usual fingering for a Bulgarian kaval in "D" but there are a few exceptions in some of the high notes. The fingering chart shows closed circles for holes closed by a finger, open circles for open holes, and shaded circles for holes which usually would not be closed for the note, but which give better pitch intonation on this kaval if they are closed. The reason for the differences is that the dimensions of the plastic tube are different than most wooden kaval. This kaval also will not be able to speak the four or five notes above high G very well. They are shown in the chart, but they are played with difficulty. (Even on wooden kaval these notes may be hard to sound.)

You will notice from the chart that the same fingering can produce more than one note. The higher note is obtained by blowing a little harder or more focused. Blowing harder still can produce an even higher note. Experiment around with getting the different notes without changing your fingering until you understand how to "change registers."

There are also some notes which have two or more alternate fingerings, such as the lower A. These alternate fingerings are often used in Bulgarian playing to articulate several of the same notes in a row, because there is a "pop" when you change the fingering. (See the Articulation section below).

Raising one finger at a time from all closed generally produces a chromatic series on the kaval, that is, each finger hole is a musical half step. There is an exception in that there is no D sharp in the low registers -- just raising the right pinkie from all closed goes from D to E. Sometimes you can make a D sharp by partially covering the right pinkie hole, but don't worry about this; there aren't many uses for it.

Note that if you blow very softly, there is a low register one octave below the nine lowest notes shown in the fingering chart. This register is useful for the occasional low note in a tune, but there is a gap between its

highest note, B, and the D with all fingers down. When notes are played in this register, they are played with a technique called kaba (kah-BAH), which is described briefly later under "Kaba." Don't worry if you have trouble getting these low notes as a beginner, they are hard to get. You can tell if you are playing in the lowest register if you are blowing very softly, and when you blow a little harder, the note goes up an octave. If it goes up a fifth (say, from D to B) you were in the second register where most of your playing will be done.

When you are trying to play a tune, you may have some trouble with notes that don't seem to want to speak. If these are not above the high G, which don't speak well anyway, the reason is probably a "leak" at one of your fingers. The low D (all the finger holes closed) just will not sound if there are any leaks. Often a leak is on a hole covered by the flat of a finger, and the leaky part is the part closest to the palm of the hand. To find leaks, try wiggling your fingers around while blowing to see if the note suddenly speaks. Or, try closing the holes one at a time from the top of the flute, playing each note down in turn. When you get to one which won't play, the finger you just put down probably has a leak.

Another learning trick is to wet your fingers with water or vegetable oil (yuk). This will help make the seals at the holes.

Use the different fingering alternatives to provide the easiest flow of fingerings. No one fingering is really preferred. Some fingerings in the higher notes give slightly different pitches, so experiment and use the one that sounds best in each tune. Sometimes you can alter the pitch by changing blowing pressure, or shading an open hole with a finger almost touching it. The chart shows those fingerings that are the most in tune, but in the end, you as the player will have to make the proper intonation for every note you play.

## Keeping a Grip

You will soon find that it is difficult to hold on to the kaval for notes which have few finger holes covered. One solution to this is to hold on by covering a hole which doesn't matter. For most of the notes on the kaval, closing a hole below two open holes will not make a noticeable change in the pitch of the note. For example, the low A has just left thumb and first finger closed, the rest are shown as open. You can close any hole in the right hand without changing the pitch of the note, so you can hold on with one of those fingers.

Many players learn to use the right pinkie to hold on when it isn't covering its hole. Place it on the pipe just below the pinkie finger hole. With some practice, you can learn to almost automatically shift the pinkie on and off the kaval. As long as it is not needed to cover its hole, it can stay down here for several notes in a row. This is probably better than covering other holes. One Bulgarian player says that the more open holes give a better sound.

Be careful of holding on with the left ring finger. This is a habit I developed, and it took a lot of practice to un-learn it when problems developed. The main problem is the intonation of A -- it is slightly flat with the left ring finger hole closed. This finger *is* commonly used to hold on when B-flat is played, however.

You will eventually discover that it is hard to hold on when "pulsing" A (briefly lifting the left second finger off). Try to balance the kaval for the brief time and not hold on with other fingers. This seems to be the way the best players do it. Strive for a lighter grip on the instrument and to hold it up more parallel with the floor. See the section below on articulation.

Your personal instructor is your best source for help with holding on to the kaval.

## Articulation and Patter

Articulation is the separating of one note from the next, usually by a tiny pause. It is especially important when two melody notes of the same pitch are right next to each other (as in "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"). Patter is the slight pulsing of held notes as if they were really strings of shorter notes. It is part of the styling of much Balkan music, especially Bulgarian. Patter is really just very light articulation. These are basic elements of style for playing kaval, and not ornaments. They should be learned if you want your playing to sound Bulgarian.

On modern transverse flutes and recorders, articulation is done by using the tongue to stop the air momentarily as if you were saying "too too" or "loo loo." Bulgarian kaval players using the Thracian style usually don't tongue, but use flips of the fingers to make notes sound separate. They constantly blow on the pipe, and do all articulation and patter with their fingers. (The Thracian style is what is usually taught at Balkan Camp. The Bulgarian Shope style and Macedonian style use the tongue, but I won't try to discuss it further.) On kaval, patter is executed similarly to articulation, but it is lighter and less distinct. It is a distinct signature of a kaval to have held notes "patter" and gives kaval music its warbling, fluttery quality.

Let's begin with patter. The idea is to have any notes longer than the basic "shortest" notes in the melody have a little pulse as if they were several of those shorter notes.

For patter, the rule is to flip the finger just above the open hole of the note, opening and closing very quickly. For example, to "patter" a held E, flip the fourth finger of the right hand off its hole and immediately back. This creates a little grace note (F) which separates the E into two pieces. If it is done fast enough, the grace note isn't really heard, and it sounds as if the note sort of warbled a bit.

Now for articulation. If two notes in a row are different, nothing special needs to be done. The second note will be articulated by just appearing different from the one before it. But if two notes in a row are the same, they may be separated by playing a different very short "note" between the two notes.

For articulation, the rule is to do more than flip the next higher finger. One way is to briefly close the hole of the note and open it again, creating a sort of downward grace note. For example, to articulate two G's, briefly slap the index finger of the right hand against its hole. Sometimes a more distinct articulation is made by slapping two or more fingers down on their holes at the same time.

A way of articulating popular with many players is to flip a hole higher up on the pipe than the note hole, creating a bigger jump to that grace note. When done quickly, this gives a bigger "pop" than patter.

(There are several schools of thought on which holes should be used. Georgi Zhelyazkov taught us at Balkan Camp in 1991 to flip either the left thumb, forefinger, or ring finger, depending on what melody note was being played. In general, use the left ring finger for any note with a right hand finger down; use the left index finger for notes with all left fingers down and no right fingers down; use the left thumb for notes with only some left fingers down. Some instructors flip the middle finger for some notes. Again, your personal instructor should advise you.)

Another way to articulate or patter is to change between alternate fingerings for the note. For example, play the A with just the left thumb and forefinger down. Then just put all the rest of the fingers down of both hands. It may require some lip control to keep an A playing and not a D. There is a little blip between the two notes. Of course, only the few notes which have alternates can do this. Sometimes there are special fingerings which can cause this blip which are not on the chart. This technique is called in Bulgarian "klepone" which I think means something akin to "blinking". Some teachers think it is over-used, but it is fun.

Performing patter and articulation (and knowing the difference) is an area where an instructor's help is best. I have a hard time describing them. But hopefully you can imitate what you hear with these techniques, and make your playing sound more Bulgarian. Note that playing with the flats of the fingers rather than the pads allows these quick flicks of the fingers. It may seem cumbersome at first, but after a while it will seem very natural, and it will sound very kaval-like.

## Simple Ornamentation

Here are briefly two types of ornamentation. The first is vibrato. Vibrato is done by slightly raising and lowering the finger on the lowest covered hole to produce the wavy pitch variations. Here, the use of the flats of the fingers makes this easier. The finger doesn't really come up off the hole, but the part out towards the tip just sort of straightens up a bit and uncovers a tiny bit of the hole. For notes where the lowest closed hole is the left ring finger (closed with the pad), try shaking the index finger of the right hand over its hole to produce the same effect.

Glissando is a smooth swoop of pitch from one note to another. Slide trombones often "gliss" dramatically. On the kaval, a way to do a glissando up is by curling the fingers across their closed holes rather than just raising them. It is almost like the holes are stroked with the tips of the fingers just before they come up off the holes. The reverse can be done for a gliss down.

Other ornaments include articulating notes even when they are different, which produces an "accent" on the note, and various combinations of flips and slaps in quick succession. These are beyond the scope of this manual and should be learned from an instructor.

## Kaba

Kaba (kah-BAH) is a technique for playing the low notes an octave below the "normal" register. These low notes from D to B can be played by blowing softly, but they are rather weak. Kaba involves sounding the low note and the one an octave above it at the same time. The result doesn't sound like two notes, but rather like the low note with a bright reedy timbre like a clarinet. This capability of the kaval distinguishes it from most other flutes, and kaval players who can fluently make kaba are esteemed. It is difficult to play kaba, and the technique for each person is different because it involves subtle formations with the lips. You should listen to a good recording of kaval music from Bulgaria to appreciate this sound. (I like Balkanton BHA 10134, with Stoyan Velichkov playing with a folk orchestra. It's an LP and currently available 6/91. The flip side is Kostadin Varimesov playing gaida with the orchestra.)

Try playing one of the higher notes in the lowest register, like A. Now blow a little harder and make the "normal" A sound (an octave above the low A). Try to move back and forth between the low and normal A just by changing your lips or breathing pressure. When you can do that, try and make a sound "between" the two notes so you get them both at the same time. This may take a slightly different lip shape. Be sure to blow softly. Often kaba will happen without you trying it (or wanting it). When it does, try to remember what you were doing so you can do it again. Be consoled, though: it is very elusive and frustrating even for good players.

Here are some things to try:

- Open your mouth wide inside without making your lips open up.
- Move your lower jaw further back than usual.
- Blow across the pipe at more of an angle than usual.
- Blow more up or down than usual.
- Blow softer with lips open by closing down your vocal cords, as if you were whispering "ahh" (but lips are still "oo").
- Frown. Smile. Tighten the corners of your lips.
- Touch the tip of your tongue against the inside of your lower front teeth.

The low notes will be the hardest, so work down from up. Don't be discouraged. It can vary from day to day, and even changes in the weather seem to affect it.

## Music

You will want to learn to play songs with your kaval. The traditional way is to imitate the tunes by ear. Try simple tunes you know. Play folk tunes from your records. Here are a couple of songs I recommend to try:

Bufcansko Horo (Folkraft 1464 record). This is a fairly simple tune which is played with two kavals and tupan drum (one kaval just drones or plays the same note continuously). It is a Macedonian song, and played in D minor because the Macedonian kavals used on the record are pitched a whole step lower than this kaval. You should try to play it in E minor which is just a whole step higher. (The first 4 notes are D, E E E).

Dospatsko Horo (Balkanton BHA 734). This is a good Bulgarian song for kaval, and it's in a good key (E minor). It has 7/8 meter, which may be tricky for a beginner.

If you want written transcriptions of popular folk dance music, a good source is