

A:3 Dance of the Mirlitons

This is a good piece to choose if you are confident with tonguing semiquavers and playing high notes up to high G ; if you are not comfortable with this, maybe consider choosing another piece.

Before starting work on this piece, try to listen online to a recording of the original orchestral music (and watch the dance) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNHxTI2B4h4> and this flute version https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_s9iBxFAXX4 which is also available as part of your exam downloads; use the code in the back of your book to access these.

Before starting work on this piece it may be helpful to play the D major two octave scale that you did for Grade 3, tongued. Then start by getting familiar with the notes, working in four bar phrases on the first section up to bar 16. Practise the D C# D C# move in the first bar you play; practise some octave hops to help with the register changes in bars 7 – 9. Look further on in the piece and see where the tune from the beginning comes back.

The little grace notes, for example in the fourth bar you play, are called acciaccatura and should be played quickly in advance of the main note. Practice playing that bar without the acciaccatura first, then aim to tuck it in just before the crotchet that it is linked to; try the same with the following bar, where it is leading to a quaver. Make sure you always slur from these grace notes to the following note.

There are a couple of phrases that might need additional work. The high G to F# move can be tricky, so make sure you take a deep breath, support the air from the bottom of your lungs, move your chin up and mouth forward, and aim the air higher up the wall in front of you; you should be aiming for where the wall meets the ceiling! The other challenging phrase is the last couple of bars, which would benefit from some repeated slow practice to get the timing right.

Then focus on the articulation, aiming for a light, delicate staccato tongue on many of the notes in this piece. Look at the music and identify where there is an additional accent or tenuto to the staccato, and where there is a tenuto on its own, such as in bar 10. The tenuto staccato notes in bar 26 just give the last four notes a bit more weight. Be careful to include the occasional slurs in the main tune, as in the third bar you play. The short legato middle section should contrast with the main tune, so make sure you play this with lovely long legato phrases.

Once you are familiar with the notes and articulation, focus on dynamics. The main tune starts piano and stays in the range from p to mf, whereas the legato middle section is a good strong forte. That middle section is marked 'espressivo' (expressively) so try and put some feeling into your playing of this section. Push the air through more quickly for a good strong tone. Try it different ways and see what works best for you.

Add in a subtle crescendo and diminuendo in bars 15 and 16, and the same in bars 31 and 39. Add the subtle diminuendo from mezzo piano to piano in bar 26. Note that the crescendo in bar 8 should take you from piano to mezzo forte, and the one in bar 40 from mezzo piano to forte; the crescendo on the second to last note finishes the piece with a flourish as well as helping you with the octave jump.

Once you are confident with playing the whole piece, add in the rit half way through bar 26 and 'a tempo' in the following bar, where you go back to your original speed. When you play this with a real pianist rather than a backing track, the pianist will follow you on this short rit and 'a tempo'.

Dance of the Mirlitons is ballet music from The Nutcracker by the Romantic composer Tchaikovsky. A mirliton is a reed pipe, like a flute, so in the original piece the main tune is played as a trio by three flautists. Imagine dancing, and make sure your staccato tonguing is light and clear to get the right feel. The legato tune in the middle was originally played by a cor anglais, a low instrument in the oboe family, so aim to sound almost like a different instrument when you play those five bars!

The tempo marking, Moderato assai, indicates a very moderate speed, so there's no need to rush! It's more of a deliberate, marked pace than anything too fast. You could try playing along with a metronome or metronome app, aiming for a speed of about crotchet = 60, (two beats per bar). Then try playing along with the example track from your downloads, and finally with the piano backing; practise.