

# Another Way to Play

By Valerie Peters, Andover, MA, [petersv14@gmail.com](mailto:petersv14@gmail.com), November 2014

Thanks to wooden dowels, a terrific craftsman, generous funding from the ARS and the Play Foundation, and a good idea, I can play the full range of the soprano and alto recorders.

Considering that I was born with an atypical cleft hand (my right hand has only a thumb and a pinky), this is a significant accomplishment. While my quest to play recorder has resulted in a satisfying, new musical experience for me, it has also deepened my passion for adaptive instrument study and development.

As a child, I avoided woodwind instruments and focused instead on piano, violin and brass instruments. Allegedly I told a friend in fifth grade band that if I had 10 fingers, I would have picked the flute! Whatever my timbre preference, I followed the practical advice of my teachers and friends and started trombone instead.

My school music experiences inspired me to pursue music education at the University of New Hampshire. After graduating, I sought jobs in elementary schools, and, soon after I started teaching, I began attending Orff-Schulwerk workshops and courses. In elemental music and movement, I found an approach to education that was as artistically fulfilling for me as it was for my students.



Recorder is an important instrument in the Orff-Schulwerk instrumentarium, and it became clear that I needed to be a proficient player in order to teach recorder to my children and play melodies and improvisations during my lessons.

Most beginners can pick up any recorder and start playing, more or less, but I could only get so far. After experimenting with the Aulos recorder for people with finger disabilities, I decided to play as much as possible on a standard model. Although atypical, I covered the fourth hole with my left pinky.

In order to cover holes with both of my right-hand digits, I needed something to substitute for the pressure normally supplied by the right thumb. My father and I invented a brace out of a wooden dowel and a plastic thumb rest. The brace essentially acts as an arm that holds the recorder, and, in combination with an adjustable neckstrap, the recorder is practically free-standing.

This was a huge development: I could use my right hand to hover over the bottom three holes and I could play nearly everything. However, I could not cover every hole, and thus my quest continued.

On a whim, I visited the Von Huene Workshop near Boston, MA, [www.vonhuene.com](http://www.vonhuene.com), hoping that someone there could give me advice. Eric Haas and his colleagues were quite intrigued with the brace that I had created, and suggested that I get a customized instrument. If I had keys on holes four and five, operated by my left pinky, I could use my right hand on holes six and seven and therefore play the entire range of the instrument.

I left the Von Huene Workshop excited about this idea, and immediately contacted early music shops and woodwind technicians to find someone willing to create a customized instrument. I was dismissed by many who said that my idea was complicated and expensive, but eventually I got in touch with Peter Worrell, a flute maker in the United Kingdom, [www.peterworrell.co.uk/peterworrell.htm](http://www.peterworrell.co.uk/peterworrell.htm). He drew up plans to add keys to a Moeck soprano made of grenadilla wood.

To my great fortune, I received funding from the Play Foundation to get this instrument in the summer of 2013. In 2014, with assistance from the American Recorder Society, I purchased an alto with the same design. The instruments are beautiful, and the keywork is gorgeous; I am incredibly blessed to have them.

Now that I have instruments that give me full access to the range of the recorder, my playing can advance greatly. I continue to play in my classroom daily, and in fall 2014 I started private lessons.

As a child, I never thought that I would be able to play a woodwind instrument to this extent—and, as I love the sound of the recorder, it is immensely satisfying to play alone and in groups. More than anything else, it makes me want to make the recorder accessible to as many people as possible.

It is this concept, that of recorder accessibility, that I feel recorder makers and teachers can explore to a much deeper level. Some projects, such as customized keywork and adjustable hole placement, are complex—yet other projects, like creating an adjustable neckstrap, are quite simple.

Perhaps most important, we must abandon the idea that there is one correct way to play the recorder,

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### *I never thought that I would be able to play a woodwind instrument...*

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and we must open our minds to new possibilities. The most difficult part of my work to get customized instruments was simply finding someone willing to embrace my idea.

Admittedly, the population of adaptive players is small, yet the pleasure it gives us to play the recorder is unimaginably great.

*Peters created a web site to share instrument adaptations for musicians with limb differences: <https://sites.google.com/site/instrumentadaptations>. See and hear her recorders at [www.youtube.com/user/americanrecordermag](http://www.youtube.com/user/americanrecordermag).*

