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OPENING MEASURES

Some well-chosen words about choosing a recorder

The three main requirements of a recorder are that it must be in tune with itself, it must be responsive throughout the entire range (all the notes must be must be easily playable), and it must sound good. A further concern for some players is that it fit the hands well (most often a problem for players with small hands or restricted finger movement).

Before buying a recorder, you need to decide whether you want plastic or wood, and, related to this, how much money you can spend. There are at least three brands of excellent plastic recorder and many more makers of good wood recorders. Plastic recorders are far cheaper than wood recorders of comparable quality.

If you buy a top-of-the-line plastic recorder by Yamaha, Zen-on, or Aulos, for instance, you will have a very good instrument. These models are based on 18th-century recorders and therefore have a true recorder sound. They are in tune, and their Baroque-style curved and narrow windways allow for tonal control. They are not heavy, and the fingerholes are spaced naturally, so they are easy on the hands. Also, the quality of individual instruments is quite consistent. (See AR, September 1991, for a comparison.)

On the downside, they are plastic-not terribly pleasing, aesthetically. Also, since the windways are rather narrow, with surfaces that won't absorb moisture, these recorders tend to clog up. (This is not an insurmountable problem, though. Just warm the instrument very well before playing and have a bottle of anti-condensation liquid on hand.) Finally, plain, shiny plastic recorders are slippery for those of us with moist hands. This causes players to clutch, and even slight clutching will constrict finger movement. However, these three makers offer "wood grain" versions that have just enough texture to avoid that slippery feeling-and the wood grain coatings look quite nice.

You can get wood recorders for prices comparable to the better plastic ones, but they are of lower quality. Cheap wood recorders often have wide, straight windways that give a hooty-er tone and do not allow for much variation of blowing and tone (the pitch changes too drastically). Faulty intonation is another common problem in cheap wood recorders. Also, the high notes are often difficult to play. I much prefer a recorder with a curved windway, and to get that you must buy a more expensive instrument.

Wood recorders clog less than plastic ones. Wood is more pleasing to hold and play on than plastic. Finally, it seems (who can measure this?) that wood gives a warmer, more living tone than plastic. Wood's only drawback is that it can crack. However, if you treat your instrument well, you should not have a problem, unless you are unlucky and get an unstable piece of wood. I have never had a recorder crack (knock on wood!).

If you decide to buy a wood recorder you will need to decide what kind of wood you want. To learn about the differences in wood types, read Philip Levin's article "Which Wood Should I Choose" in AR, May 1986. Much of the difference between recorders of different woods seems to be in the ear of the beholder, so to speak. You must try all different types. Don't just buy the cheapest—or the most expensive. Decide what you like. And ask other players for their opinions on types of wood.

What to listen for

When buying a wood recorder, try several of the same model. They will not be the same, and you need to find one that works well and that you like. If you are not confident of your judgment or playing skills, take your teacher or another good recorder player with you to help. No matter who helps you choose, remember that you will be playing this recorder; if you don't like it, don't buy it.

You should not buy a wood recorder you can't try out in the store or on approval at home. If a dealer will not allow this, or will not agree to take back the instrument for a full refund within about 14 days if you are not satisfied, you should *not* buy from that dealer. For those of you who do not

have a good recorder dealer near you, there are several music stores advertising in this magazine that sell recorders by mail order.

You can decide on a particular make and model of recorder by talking to a lot of players, and, if possible, trying out their instruments.

Once you have decided on one or two models, go to your recorder dealer and ask to try several recorders of each. You must test each recorder for tuning, responsiveness, and tone.

1) Test for general tone by playing some long tones in each range—low, middle, and high. Then play a melody that you know well and find easy (so that you have plenty of mind-power for listening). Bring a piece of music if you need to. Play the same tones and melody on each recorder, one after the other. The instant you notice one recorder you don't like, put it away so you can narrow your search.

2) Test tuning by playing a slow chromatic scale over the entire range of each recorder. Watch an electronic tuner as you play, being aware of notes for which you have to make unnatural adjustments in breath pressure. (If you cannot play a chromatic scale, learn to! Or get someone else to do it for you.) Be sure you know the correct fingerings, or you will be out of tune. Also, recorders vary in design, so check to see if certain notes on that recorder require modified fingerings.

You should also play intervals, especially the octaves (on the alto) on A, B, B, C, and D, and e''- e''' and f''- f''', checking to make sure they are not sharp or flat using your own natural blowing.

If you find a tuning problem on a recorder that you really like in every other way, ask the recorder maker or technician if that particular problem can be corrected without causing others.

3) Test for responsiveness by trying out touchy notes using long tones—

When testing new wood recorders you must keep in mind that they are not used to being played. They will clog up, making it impossible for you to judge tone. Therefore, you must test recorders efficiently, never playing very long at a time on any one instrument.

soprano/alto: low C/F; low D/G; high G#/C#; high C/F (\emptyset 1 - 45). Experiment with left thumb position on the high notes. All these notes should come out easily and clearly. Have someone who plays better than you test them too, if possible.

For the low notes, play a long tone on each note—begin blowing very softly, gradually increasing breath pressure until the note cracks. There should be some space between the beginning and the breaking point. You only need to do this once per note on each instrument. Be gentle. A recorder should have fairly strong low notes that allow for some flexibility in blowing. Listen for a burble on the low G.

On the high notes test quick response by playing four rapid staccato notes in a row on one pitch. The individual notes should come out clearly with minimal "chiff." If you do not yet have good blowing technique, ask a better player to test this.

When you've found an instrument you like in all three areas, buy it.

Further considerations

When testing new wood recorders you must keep in mind that they are not used to being played. They will clog up after 5 or 10 minutes, making it impossible for you to judge tone. Therefore, you must test recorders efficiently, never playing very long at a time on any one instrument. However, if you follow the plan above, it won't take you long to choose a recorder.

If you can take several recorders home on approval, you can do a number of testing sessions spaced over a few days. Another note: never make any kind of mark on a recorder you do not own to tell it apart from the others. Keep each recorder in or on its case, and write your comments on post-it notes stuck on the cases.

I think the best bet for a new player is to begin (on soprano or alto) with a top-ofthe-line "wood grain" plastic recorder made by Yamaha, Zen-on, or Aulos. Once a player has enough experience to know that they really like playing recorder, I suggest moving on to a high-quality productionline model. If a player is very enthusiastic and committed as a recorder player and is willing to spend more, the next step is a hand-made recorder based on historical instruments. To choose such an instrument, you have to think a lot about what repertoire you like best, how much solo versus consort playing you do, and talk to a lot of experienced players who are familiar with the qualities of instruments by different recorder makers.

Frances Blaker



