

# Technique Tip: Using a metronome

This piece is part of Sprenkeling's ongoing technique series.

## **PART 1: "Use of Air and Breath Control: The Respiratory System" / AR Spring 2021**

Use of air in everyday breathing and for good musical tone, with exercises for correct breathing.

## **PART 2: "More on Breathing plus Posture and Hands" / AR Summer 2021**

Additional breathing exercises, good posture, embouchure and hand position.

## **PART 3: "Articulation" / AR Fall 2021**

added articulation to previous skills.

## **PART 4: "A Toolbox for Coordination of Air, Fingers and Articulation" / AR Winter 2021**

covered all skills learned so far.

## **PART 5: "Daily study habits & how to work on a new piece of music." / AR Spring 2022**

applied skills in daily practice.

## **PART 6: "How to play air and finger vibrato." / AR Fall 2022**

added an expressive element.

## **PART 7: "How to apply articulations to music." / AR Winter 2022**

Basic rules, and when to break them.

Another tool to add to your practice toolbox.



### **WRITTEN BY LOBKE SPRENKELING**

Lobke Sprenkeling obtained her Bachelor's and Master's

degrees as a recorder player and theatrical performer at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague and Utrecht Conservatory, Netherlands. She continued her studies at the Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya, Spain, with a national scholarship from the *Dutch Prince Bernhard Culture Fund*. In 2016 she earned her music Ph.D. *cum laude* at the Universidad Politècnica de València. She also studied multidisciplinary theater from a musical perspective (Carlos III University, Madrid, and the Yale University Summer Program); her specific interest in the relationship between musician and body has led to her performing in and creating multidisciplinary works. She taught recorder at the pre-conservatory program (ages 8-18) of Conservatorio Profesional of Valencia (2007-16), and has taught in Europe, Mexico and the U.S. (sessions with the recorder societies in Phoenix, AZ, and Seattle, WA, and for Amherst Early Music).

She currently teaches recorder at the Real Conservatorio Superior de Música de Madrid. Recently she released a CD (reviewed in this issue) and taught at Lyon National Conservatory in France, in an Erasmus Program collaboration with recorder pedagogues Pierre Hamon and Sébastien Marq. Info: <https://lobke.world>.

When playing the recorder, it can be challenging to keep a steady beat at all times, especially when tackling complex pieces or when playing in an ensemble. This is where a metronome can be a useful tool, as it can help improve your sense of rhythm and timing. However, it is important to remember that using a metronome is not the be-all and end-all for good tempo and rhythm—but rather a tool to be alternated with other practice techniques. In this article, we will discuss the benefits and limitations of using a metronome, as well as some tips to help you get the most out of it.

Personally I must admit that I've almost avoided the metronome throughout my studies. I felt that it was too mechanical and that my own inner sense of rhythm was good enough. I'd also seen adult students become too dependent on the metronome, not actually listening to their bodies or to other musicians. However, just like everything, a tool is just a tool: it's about how we use it.

Over time I realized that I may have good sense of rhythm—but that, just like any human being, my sense of tempo fluctuates a bit more than my brain thinks. A lot is going on in the body! Our heartbeat can alter the tempo, just to mention the most obvious. We can be more tired one day and more jumpy another day.

Although the body has its organic fluctuations, it's still important to connect to its inner sense of rhythm and



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tempo. Thus I became interested in the various uses of the metronome—not just in its droning beat, to keep you from wandering away from the 100 beats per minute (bpm) that you set.

### A bit of history

It's fascinating to know that the metronome we use today was only invented in the 19th century. However, the history of timekeeping in music goes back centuries, starting with the 16th-century scientist Galileo, who observed in a pendulum's movement the quality of isochronism (occurring in equal periods of time; literally "in the same time"). This led to the invention of pendulum-powered clocks in the 17th and 18th centuries, which revolutionized timekeeping.

In 1696, the French musician Étienne Loulié designed the first metronome with an adjustable pendulum, although it was silent and required constant visual monitoring. Loulié and his contemporaries struggled with creating a metronome that could keep up with the slow tempos of the so-called *tactus*, or pulse, which often ranged from 40 to 60 bpm.

In those times, musicians had to rely solely on other means to keep a consistent tempo. One of the most common methods was to use the human body as a reference for tempo. For example, a lead singer in a church choir would mark the *tactus* by moving an arm up and down while reading from the notes in the choirbook resting on a stand, providing a clear indication for others.

Until the 17th century, bars and bar lines were not used to indicate time or meter. Instead, the concept of the *tactus* was one of keeping track of the tempo without clearly marking a closed concept like a 4/4 measure (meter), for example. This allowed for a more fluid sense of rhythm within natural tempo keeping. Thanks to the underlying pulse, changing from a bi-



nary to a ternary subdivision was easy: keep the tactus equal and just change the number of beats you'd fit in it.

This way of thinking about time, using body movement and biological rhythm, isn't so bad after all! It's definitely our goal, but now we have an extra tool in the form of the metronome.

The introduction of the metronome in the early 19th century changed the way musicians kept time. It allowed musicians to practice and perform with greater precision and accuracy, and it enabled composers to specify the tempo of their music more precisely.

However, despite the widespread use of the metronome today, some musicians still prefer to use the human body as a reference for tempo—particularly in certain styles of music such as jazz or folk music, where the rhythm is more fluid and flexible. Early music performers also fall into this category, using pulse rather than bar lines to mark the tempo—just as it was done in the time when the music was written.

### Use with caution!

Before getting into the advantages and practical applications of the metronome, let me first mention its limitations. I would like to underline that it is only a guiding tool, which should be discontinued periodically in order to develop a personal inner sense of rhythm.

Once I had a private student who had been practicing with the metronome—all of his pieces, all of the time. He had become too dependent on the reliable and unmovable pulse of the metronome. As soon as he played without it, he drifted out of tempo and rhythm.

Worst of all, when playing with others, he wouldn't listen to their musical lines. Rather, he would be engrossed in keeping his tempo and rhythm, but as a kind of isolated activity. The result was that he was always out of sync with the others. We had to work on letting



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go of the metronome and relying more on his internal sense of rhythm.

The metronome is not your conductor—a substitute for either your own inner rhythm or for your active listening!

Be mindful of hemiolas or changing meters: a metronome may not be the right tool if you encounter many of these in your music. In the case of hemiolas, it's a good idea, for example, to practice getting into your body the 123 123 12 12 12 rhythm (as in "I Want to Be in America" from Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*).

## Benefits of using a metronome

There are at least three benefits that the metronome gives us.

1. It's a great way of determining the tempo of a piece—and, when playing with an ensemble, it can be used to agree on a precise tempo determination.
2. It's fantastic for giving us feedback on our own rhythmical performance in group or solo playing: whether we play in tempo all the time or not; whether we slow down, speed up or stay the same; where our tempo fluctuates (it is for each of us to find out and decide if that has a musical basis or not).
3. A metronome can be used as an aid to stretch our breathing.

### THE FIRST BENEFIT:

#### TEMPO DETERMINATION

When you learn a new piece of music or work on a difficult passage, it can be easy to lose track of the beat. This is where a metronome can be really helpful. By setting the metronome to the desired tempo, you can practice playing along with a consistent beat, which can help you stay in time and avoid rushing or dragging. It also provides immediate feedback when you make a mistake, which is helpful in identifying areas that need more practice.

How to use it: If you're really not

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Alternate playing the music with and without the help of the metronome.

certain you are keeping the right tempo and rhythm throughout the piece, start practicing it slowly with the metronome. You can divide the music into different sections and work rhythmically on each section.

1. Isolate the problem measures and focus on them.
2. Start slowly but rhythmically. As we've discussed before, this is important because, when you play something for the first time, your brain creates the connections for its muscle memory, so you don't want to make mistakes that may stick in your memory. Tempo and rhythm are part of what your body learns.
3. After playing a passage at least three times perfectly, increase the tempo by 4 bpm on your metronome. This increment is very small, but doing this repeatedly will help you get comfortable with a faster tempo in a gradual way.
4. Experiment with different subdivisions of the beat. Try playing with the metronome set to quarter notes, eighth notes, or even 16th notes to improve your precision.
5. Alternate playing the music with and without the help of the metronome. Listen to and feel the tempo. Check periodically to see if you're maintaining that tempo.

### SECOND BENEFIT: FEEDBACK

For an ensemble, a metronome can be great as a feedback device. In an ensemble setting, using a metronome can be an effective way to ensure that everyone is playing together at the

same tempo. This is particularly useful when working on complex pieces of music with multiple parts and intricate rhythms. By setting the metronome to the desired tempo, each member of the ensemble can practice at home, playing with the same pulse, which can help create a unified and cohesive sound when the group plays together.

How to use it:

1. Play the piece a couple of times with a metronome. Observe where you feel the music becoming slower or faster than the metronome.
2. Analyze if there's a musical reason for slowing down or speeding up at those points. Also, decide if you want to follow the metronome or, consciously, follow your own tempo.

Determine the tempo according to the fastest notes that you're able to play. If this means that your slower passages are not as fast as you'd like, think of the flow of the rhythm and how it makes more sense to keep everything in the same tempo.

Somewhat illogically, an opposite situation can happen: we run in the fast passages and slow down in the slow ones! Here we should be aware of our impulses and decide if the music is really meant to be played like that.

Recording yourself and listening to your own playing is a fantastic type of feedback!

### THIRD BENEFIT:

#### BREATH DURATION COACH

A metronome can also be used to stretch your breathing. Play a scale pattern up and back down, a quarter note to each click, and then hold the final note for four clicks. Gradually slow down the metronome while playing the same pattern. This can be a good warm-up to help you to improve your breath control, as long as it doesn't cause unnecessary strain in your body in any unhealthy way.

## When should I let go of the metronome?

Girolamo Frescobaldi, a renowned early 17th-century composer, wrote in the preface for his *Toccate* for harpsichord that musicians can slow down or speed up the tempo, just as one would sing a madrigal, according to the affect. This is interesting because it indicates that tempo was not something absolute, but rather a variable to express emotion.

While a metronome is a great tool for improving your sense of rhythm, it's important to remember that it's not a substitute. Practicing with a metronome can help you develop a strong, steady pulse, but it's also important to learn to trust your own internal sense of rhythm. This is especially important when playing with others in an ensemble, where it's essential to listen to each other and play together as a cohesive unit.

Although you can use the metronome to outline where your rhythmic difficulties are, it's important to avoid becoming reliant on it.

## How can you develop your internal sense of rhythm?

It's quite easy to develop a habit of tapping a foot, but this can audibly or visually disturb a musical performance. Rhythm is something we can develop internally within our bodies and minds. It's a strange feeling, but it's as if time were bouncing in our heads; or as if the gentle push and pull of the regular waves in the sea has stayed inside of us, even after returning to land. Often, when we start to play our instruments, we get lost in our heads and forget about our bodies altogether.

To develop your internal sense of rhythm, it's helpful to engage the body. Loosen up your knees and bounce lightly from time to time. Try walking slowly to your music—but also listen to all genres of music

and feel the pulse and rhythm.

And, last but not least, if you have difficulty with certain rhythms, verbalize them: place words under them and practice saying those words rhythmically. The Kodály and Takadimi methods use specific syllables for each note value or combination, so I definitely recommend their strategies if you need to develop your general sense of rhythm by using syllables.

However, there is another great way to use the metronome. Just as we can count quarter notes, or alternatively count half notes in cut time, we can ask the metronome to help keep us honest in a similar process. For example, in 4/4, start playing at a tempo where the metronome beats quarter notes, at 160 bpm—then go to 80 bpm, beating half notes. If you want to try going farther, you can even go to 40, with the metronome clicking only on whole notes.

## How about using a metronome to speed up?

Earlier I mentioned increasing the tempo by 4 beats per minute on your metronome. In small steps, it can be a relaxed way of gradually speeding up. However, this method has its limitations, and we should avoid at any time being pushed by the metronome and tensing up because of it.

Another way of speeding up, which I find more efficient, is to alternate between practicing the music in short sections consciously and slowly, and playing those sections fast but completely relaxed. If there is a mistake at that point, don't tense up because of

it. Breathe, and simply be as present as possible, trying not to repeat the mistake.

From time to time, you can use the metronome to check at what speed you are playing. To speed up, for any player at any level, I recommend you combine two other ways of practicing, where you play:

- the piece as fast as your brain can still follow, until it has become automatic
- small sections that your brain can comprehend, at the fastest tempo you can manage without tensing up.

## Metronome apps

These days, anyone can have a metronome in their pocket. Many of these apps are free and do a fine job. I prefer one that allows tapping the tempo you've got in mind, after which the app tells you the metronome marking. Also, make sure you have an app where you can determine the time signature so that the sound is different on the first beat of every bar.

To sum up, a tool is only as good as the way in which it is used. Use the metronome as a feedback device, but also train and trust your own body's sense of the beat.

Making music means getting into a daily conversation with the music, with yourself, and with your fellow musicians. On a sad day, your music may be slightly slower; on other days you might be more nervous and go a bit faster—that's part of making music, a way of expressing yourself as a human being and having a dialog with the music itself. 🌸

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### LINKS OF INTEREST:

- Lobke Sprenkeling's web site: <https://lobke.world>
- Previous articles in her series on recorder technique: <https://americanrecorder.org/extra>
- Videos for this series of articles: [www.youtube.com/americanrecordermag](http://www.youtube.com/americanrecordermag)
- Rhythm syllables (including Kodály and Takadimi): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counting\\_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counting_(music))