

Technique Tip: Daily study habits & how to work on a new piece of music



WRITTEN BY
**LOBKE
SPRENGELING**

Lobke Sprengeling
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 de Valencia (2007-16), and has taught in Europe, the U.S. and Mexico. She currently teaches recorder at the Real Conservatorio Superior de Música de Madrid. Info: <https://lobke.world>.

This article builds on a series of four that cover basic technique tips for the recorder.

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

The first installment covered use of air in everyday breathing and in producing good musical tone, with exercises aimed at solid breath support and correct breathing techniques.

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

The second article added more breathing exercises, plus delved into good posture, embouchure and hand position.

PART 3: "Articulation" / AR Fall 2021 built on previous skills to work on articulation.

PART 4: "A Toolbox for Coordination of Air, Fingers and Articulation" / AR Winter 2021 pulled together all skills previously learned.

Playing a musical instrument has something in common with high-level sports: we use specific muscles over and over again, while trying to prevent overuse and injuries in the long term. Whether we practice every day or a few times a week, it's important to be conscious of the strain we might put on certain muscles through tension, poor posture, repetitive movement and—especially with the bigger recorders—asymmetric gestures. Just as any sport requires us to warm up and cool down, practicing our instrument also requires the same. In our warm-up, we combine stretching and exercises to maintain flexibility.

Recorder players have a great advantage: our general posture can stay quite natural, as opposed to the transverse flute or the violin, which require an asymmetrical posture that can soon be detrimental. However, those of us who play tenor recorders and bass recorders are well aware that they make us stretch our fingers in a more artificial way, which can lead to a less natural angle in the right wrist. We need to prepare and tone the correct muscles in order to prevent contracting certain muscles (yes, I'm talking about those painful knots in tensed areas of the neck, shoulder and arms).

Warming up

Let's have a look at how to warm up best for playing the recorder. Our warm-up will consist of two phases:

- General mobility exercises and stretches
- Warming up with the instrument in a gentle and progressive way.

PHASE 1 OF WARMING UP

Mobility exercises work on elasticity and muscle tone, plus joint mobility and coordination. They prepare the muscles for stretching and performance, thus preventing injuries. Great as a warm-up, they can also be done

when you are feeling stiff. while taking a short break from playing. Don't forget to breathe while doing these exercises. Go through the movements in a slow and smooth way, never forcing or causing any pain.

Stretches are definitely necessary after playing, but gentle stretching also is good before playing, after you've done the mobility exercises. Stretches prepare the muscles to better perform and tolerate the effort of playing.

In order to stretch, it's important to relax and breathe. It should always feel like a pleasant tension, never painful. The stretch should be held for 20-30 seconds per side.

A third type—toning exercises—is essential to be done by musicians, but recommended to do a couple of hours before or to do after playing—about two or three times a week, but not heavily. Toning exercises maintain general muscle condition, which is strength and endurance. They help to keep the muscles balanced, improve posture and prevent injuries, and are necessary for all musicians. These can be the typical exercises used in Pilates, yoga or other gentle strengthening exercise programs. There are also toning exercises for hands and fingers.

PHASE 2: EXERCISES

In your warm-up, start from general movement of the biggest muscle groups and end with smaller movement. An example for warming up could be:

- Rotate the hips
- Stretch your arms above your head
- Mobilize the spine: for example, cat-cow in yoga or dolphin/tortoise from Qigong
- Rotate your shoulders, elbow joints and wrists (in both directions)
- Stretch from side to side
- Gently rotate the torso, while keeping good lower back posture
- Stretch your neck gently by moving it in straight movements (never in

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Practice in the most conscious way possible ... in order for the correct movements to become automatic.

circles): move as if you are saying yes, saying no, side to side

- Open and close your hands
- Move your fingers: for example, as if playing castanets while flamenco dancing
- Gently stretch your back: in yoga, downward facing dog; or face the wall, placing the hands on the wall as high as possible
- Open up your chest by clasping your hands behind your back and gently pulling them downward
- Finish with other gentle arm, wrist and hand stretches

Of course, if you have any specific injury, consult a doctor before doing these exercises. Always listen to your body: if it hurts, it's not good for you.

Daily practice program

Let's move on to our daily practice program, which includes the next phase of the warm-up, based on gentle and progressive work on the instrument. We begin with long tones, slow scales, etc., that allow us to warm up without tensing up unconsciously. The more difficult our repertoire, the more important, and the longer this progressive warming up should be.

The keys to a good warm-up on your instrument are:

- gentle movements
 - variety
 - moderate speed
 - neutral position of the joints
 - good posture
- We can establish three blocks during our daily practice:
- A: specific warm-up on the instrument and technique
 - B: repertoire
 - C: improvisation



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PRACTICE BLOCK A

Until we have internalized the practice of finding the center of each note—where your instrument resonates best and is most “comfortable”—we start with long tones. At a minimum, this should include a low note, a middle note, and a high note. However, if you have more time, the ideal is to play a chromatic scale using all the notes of the recorder.

Next we play slurred scales by heart. By playing slurred, we can focus on the air, the fingers and their coordination. It's a great way (like playing long tones) of warming up the abdominal muscles needed for our breath support. The air is the basis of everything: articulation is added, just as consonants are added to our spoken phrases, so this is a great way of working right from the beginning and maintaining continuity.

When playing scales by heart, we don't have to focus on reading: we focus on listening to the sound and to our own body. If you're at a level of beginner/intermediate, playing scales by heart means that scales are not yet natural to you, so this is a fantastic exercise that trains the analytical part of your brain, your memory, your listening, and your knowledge of the different keys. I would first choose to work with scales that have simpler key signatures, such as C major, F major, G major; then continue to two flats or sharps—B^b major, D major; and so on.

Intermediate/advanced players can travel along the entire range of the recorder, leaving out more advanced scales if they prefer (remember that this part of our study has to be comfortable!). For example, on an alto recorder play: F major, G major, A^b major or A major, B^b major, C major, D major, E^b major or E major.

For more advanced players, I recommend playing major scales moving up the entire chromatic range of the recorder—for the alto recorder: F ma-

jor, F[#] major, G major, G[#] major, etc.

For all levels we can also add minor scales or other types of scale patterns.

The point here is that these scales are a melody that the mind already knows, so we don't have to think too much about notes and can focus instead on posture (relaxed shoulders, straight head, fingers, etc.); breathing; relaxing the muscles as much as possible while they remain highly efficient, just like the mechanism of a Swiss clock. We tend to want to do too much, so this is an excellent moment to focus on the relationship between minimum effort and maximum efficiency.

As an extra step, you can go through the study book, *Three Exercises* by Kees Boeke, slurring all the notes that you can. This focuses entirely on the coordination among the fingers, in all possible combinations. The goal is to do it with precision in rhythm and coordination, just as with the scales—but here we work on specific and deliberate combinations of fingerings.

Next, we add articulations. We want to choose exercises that are not too difficult, so that we can work on different combinations of articulations while staying as relaxed as possible. For those at a beginner-intermediate level, there are several publications with easy studies. For intermediate and advanced players, I recommend working on the different groupings of articulations of *T* and *D* with the study book *The Complete Articulator*, also by Kees Boeke, which works on shifting the combinations of *T* and *D* throughout a measure.

It would also be good to work on double articulations: *lere, did'l* or *dege/teke*, using a pattern that is comfortable for you and that can also serve as a warm-up, such as repeated notes; or for more advanced players, easy arpeggio patterns.

At this point, if you'd like to work on specific technical things and you

have the time, you can work on étude books. A wonderful example for more advanced players is the *Caprices* by J.J. Quantz, or the exercises in *Advanced Recorder Technique* by Gudrun Heyens and Peter Bowman. For beginner/intermediate players, there are many great and fun study books out there. Personally I still think that *Das Tägliche Pensum* (*The Daily Lesson*) by Hans Ulrich Staeps is a great study book, as well as Hans-Martin Linde's *Neuzeitliche Übungsstücke für die Altblockflöte* (*Modern Exercises for Treble Recorder*). We can also use this time to work on improvisation and ornamentation. Think of improvising a prelude, or perhaps you want to improvise diminutions for your Renaissance cadences.

PRACTICE BLOCK B

Now we come to our musical pieces! I highly recommend making a weekly plan for the repertoire on which you want to work. In this way, you structure the process, and you motivate yourself. If you can plan a specific time every day for your practice, it will prevent any stress about practicing and about feeling that you don't have the time. Try to study at least a part of each musical work every day that you practice. Approach this time with focus and attention: never play over your music to simply “comply” with the obligation.

PRACTICE BLOCK C

Finally, it's time to improvise. Even if you don't have much time or don't feel like it, this is the perfect cooling down moment on your instrument. Take it easy, play some music that you enjoy, be curious—you can even improvise on music from your repertoire.

Improvisation should not be underestimated: it strengthens our listening, the relationship among fingering, our internal hearing of the music,

our creativity, and even the analytical part of our mind. It frees us from the limitations of musical studies and the written repertoire.

For those of us who play early music, improvisation is a necessary part of our studies. We can work on it directly when studying musical pieces, or separately. It depends on the type of improvisation as well, of which there are several, such as:

- improvisation on an ostinato bass
- improvisation of variations on a theme (usually of a melody consisting of several phrases, on a much longer set of harmonies and the associated bass line, which is more complex than an ostinato bass)
- improvisation while developing a melody (the art of diminution)
- improvisation of a Baroque prelude or a Renaissance recercata (a free form in a certain historical style)
- improvisation of a second voice to existing music; as a child I used to sing a second voice to all the pop music that my family listened to—that was excellent practice!

What has your practice inspired in you? Remember that you need to cool down, so don't strain too much at this point—or, if you do, remember to slow it down afterwards.

Don't forget to stretch or do some mobility exercises in the middle of your practice, to give yourself a break if you need it.

Cooling down

Like warming up, active cooling down also has two phases.

The first is to gradually reduce the intensity, difficulty and speed of the pieces played. If the activity has been

short or light, it will be enough to dedicate about five minutes to this phase. If it has been longer or more intense, it may take 10 to 20 minutes. This will allow the activated muscles and the body in general to eliminate metabolic waste and accumulated tension more effectively.

Second, we do specific stretching exercises for the muscles with which we've been working most. Personally, I like to get back to mobility exercises as well, thus applying my muscles in ways different from those I used while practicing.

I strongly recommend that you stretch after practicing. Start with the most tense or painful side. (Unconsciously, we tend to spend more time on the side where we begin our stretches.) Do the stretches consistently: it's easy to remember to do them when you feel pain or tension, but we tend to forget them if we don't feel anything specific. Again, the stretch should be held for 20-30 seconds, before going to the other side. If necessary you can repeat.

How to work on a new piece

Having broken down our practice program into several elements, I would like to include ideas about ways to approach a new piece, when working on your repertoire in Block B.

The first time we study a work, it has to be perfect. The reason for this is that the first time is when we create muscle memory, which is the relationship between the brain and the muscles. A signal from the brain to the muscles is formed as a consequence of what those muscles have been doing from the start. This is why it's so

important that those muscles don't do anything counterproductive the first few times you play the piece. Not only does this apply to what the fingers do, but the whole body: the abdominal muscles that form your breath support, your posture, the presence or absence of tension, etc.

This is why you have to practice in the most conscious way possible: everything has to be under control. The brain has to be able to follow what the fingers are doing, in order for the correct movements to become automatic.

Therefore we play slowly, and then we continue to practice slowly but rhythmically—a detail that shouldn't be overlooked. If we practice everything slowly, but not with the correct rhythm, then the brain won't assimilate the correct rhythm. For this reason, if we have a musical piece that is rhythmically complex, we isolate the rhythm.

Practice the rhythms first with clapping or even verbalizing. "Narrating" the music is a very good study tip—as done in the Kodály method, which uses syllables (*ta* for quarter notes, *ti* for eighth notes, *tiri* for 16th notes, *ta-aa* for half notes, *tam tidam* for dotted rhythms, etc.).

Finally, it is also important that we learn to look a measure or two ahead, so that we're not surprised when reading what comes up next. When we are playing music, a lot is happening simultaneously in the brain. In the case of reading ahead, it means we are training ourselves to have a bigger overview of the music in general, while being focused on—and listening to—what we are actually playing in the moment. ✨

LINKS OF INTEREST:

- Lobke Sprenkeling's web site: <https://lobke.world>
- Previous articles in this series on recorder technique: https://americanrecorder.org/american_recorder_magazine_ex.php

- Videos for this entire series of articles: www.youtube.com/americanrecordermag
- Kodály Method, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kodály_method