

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.

PART 8: "How to use double tonguing and apply it to music" / [AR Spring 2023](#)

ALSO: "Using a metronome" / [AR Summer 2023](#)

Technique Tip: Now what?

Life after your first recorder lesson or workshop



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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 and taught at Lyon National Conservatory in France, in an Erasmus Program collaboration with recorder pedagogues Pierre Hamon and Sébastien Marq.

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You've taken the online beginner classes—now what? You've attended your first workshop—now what?

You may have just taken a peek into the possibilities of the recorder. Perhaps you know a little about articulation and air on the recorder, but are not sure what to do next to keep on practicing and improving.

Perhaps you would like to be able to play in an ensemble, or just work on your personal technique. This article will suggest your next steps.

Instruments

As a beginner, it's best to start with just one size of recorder—the soprano, alto or tenor recorder. Which one you choose depends on a few things: whether you've played other instruments before (or the recorder itself); the span of your hand; or your personal preference.

The soprano and tenor recorder are C instruments, while the alto recorder is an F instrument (in both cases, the note produced with all fingers down). Reading music will be the same on the soprano and tenor recorder, but a fourth higher on the alto recorder.

ALTO RECORDER

The alto recorder is not like transposing instruments such as the B^b clarinet—which read an adapted score in C, but sound in another key, sometimes to avoid using many ledger lines. We ourselves have to adapt to using the same fingering patterns, but pro-

ducing different notes when playing an alto compared to a soprano recorder.

However, the alto recorder has several advantages. It was the main size in the Baroque. Its sound is gentle to the ear, its use of the air allows for a comfortable airstream, and it's also still comfortable for most hands. Flute players and perhaps other wind players may find the "feel" of the alto recorder to be similar to their experience with the modern instruments.

I would recommend you begin with the alto recorder, or take it up fairly soon after you begin your recorder studies. Even if it's hard at the start to adapt to playing the music, you'll find that you'll soon get used to it. In fact, it's a great brain workout to play different recorders and in different clefs! There are instruments in G and D that are widely used by professionals, as well as other sizes in almost all keys.

TENOR RECORDER

Some people prefer the mellow and beautiful low sound of the tenor. To play tenor, you have to make sure that your hands can reach the finger holes without straining, although today there are models equipped with extra keys. Playing a C instrument like the tenor recorder allows you to play other C instruments like the soprano.

SOPRANO RECORDER

The soprano recorder is perhaps the easiest to start with. We tend to teach it as the first instrument for children because their hands are still very small—but its sound is quite high and sometimes shrill, and for a good sound you have to moderate your airstream much more than with an alto recorder. This is why I recommend adults start with the alto recorder rather than with the soprano recorder.

LEARNING A SECOND SIZE

When is a good time to begin learning a second size, once you've started

your recorder studies? It depends on your previous musical experience and ease of sight-reading.

Normally after a year or so we can start thinking about a second size of instrument. The main focus will be to *not* become confused, so you'll need to keep practicing both sizes. If you started on alto and find yourself using alto fingerings while playing the soprano or tenor (or vice versa), take a step back. Dedicate more time to your first instrument, and take the second instrument in smaller steps.

PLASTIC OR WOOD?

Plastic is fine to start with; Yamaha has a Baroque model series that is great value for money. Over time you will want to move to a wooden recorder.

How to progress

The good news is that there are so many online resources today that, even if you live in a place where there are no other recorder players around, you can still take online classes, read helpful advice from professionals, and connect online with other recorder players. You can plan ahead to attend your next workshop, ideally in person. There are also recorder methods with accompaniment.

The ARS website has so many useful resources, including a list of recorder teachers! There is a special "Learning Resources" page within the website. Here you will find instructional videos, technique tip videos and fingering charts, etc. For members there are free second level classes, and a Traveling Teacher Program for which you and your friends could apply.

In various Facebook groups, including one moderated by the ARS, you can also ask questions. What I definitely warn against, however, are the many "tutorials" on YouTube nowadays by recorder beginners—the ones where you can play the notes of a song along with someone who hasn't

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The ideal situation is that you would take classes or study privately with a professional teacher, so that you experience two major contributors to making progress: consistency and professional feedback.... The feedback can be accomplished by making a recording and then listening very carefully to yourself.... Consistency is all about practicing regularly. It is better to practice every day for short periods than to practice for hours once a week.

studied the recorder enough to have good technique and, in fact, turns out to be playing on a recorder with German fingerings instead of Baroque fingerings. (German fingerings—which were supposedly simplified, but also often out of tune—were popular in the early 20th century, mostly in Germany in school settings.)

The ideal situation is that you would take classes or study privately with a professional teacher, so that you experience two major contributors to making progress: consistency and professional feedback. Even if you decide not to go with a teacher, finding alternatives to them will help you improve.

The feedback can be accomplished by making a recording and then listening very carefully to yourself. It really helps you to improve—and, most importantly, to avoid making mistakes and developing bad habits, which is the problem with our seemingly easy instrument. It can produce a pleasing sound from the beginning, but to play more difficult music on it well, without tension—all while making it sound good—that's another story.

Consistency is all about practicing regularly. It is better to practice every

day for short periods than to practice for hours once a week. Practicing is not just about playing; it's also about learning to be your own teacher. You have to learn to listen, with your ears and with your body. How does it sound and how does it feel?

Technical aspects requiring consistency are posture, sound production (breath support, playing in the center of each note, tuning), articulation, coordination, rhythm, and listening to others when playing together. Musical areas include using different articulations (depending on different historical styles), ornamentation, improvisation, reading different clefs according to historical styles, tempo, etc.

Breathing as a practice routine

I always start with breathing exercises, like the ones I cover in my writings and video about the use of air and breath control. Do this first without the recorder, really connecting with the abdominal muscles that move the diaphragm. Especially during the first few months, work very consciously on this connection and on muscle control. It's harder to feel it when we blow into the recorder because we're also listening to the sound and thinking of the tongue. Without the recorder, looking in the mirror, we can feel and see how it works in our body.

This is a practice habit where the no-recorder stage requires at least a couple of months of consistency. You can focus on your breathing outside of your established practice time, too!

Practice habits over time, when you have just started

Established? Well, it really helps to block out a time in your calendar for your practice (or for any desired activity). If you're having trouble setting fixed times, divide your day into two or three parts, and assign your practice to one of those parts.

Plan your week. What are your

current goals, and how much do you want to do during that week?

If you can't manage to play everything on the same day, use what I call the overlapping method: on the second day, repeat some of the pieces from the first day, and add some new ones, and so on. In that way, by the end of the week, you'll have covered all of the pieces.

The important thing with building new habits is that you just start doing them, even if it's only for five minutes. Devoting five minutes is always better than not doing the activity at all!

Do a warmup, first without the instrument, then on the instrument. This is the moment you search for ease in whatever you do. The best professionals are able to play the most difficult passages with the least possible effort: that's one of the key rules. If you want to learn more about how to warm up and structure your practice, check out my two videos about warming up and study habits, and also read my past LEARN articles in *AR*. (See the list at the start of this article; some have related videos posted on the ARS YouTube channel.)

When you think you can do the breathing exercises on the recorder without using your chest muscles (and definitely not engaging your shoulders), then you can move on to playing long notes on the recorder. Begin with the notes you can easily play, focus on your posture (see my article and video on good posture and fingers)—and from there on, blow one long note after another, focusing the sound in the center of each note.

Articulation, scales, finger combinations, etc.

Your next step is to practice to perfect your *T* and *D*. You can articulate on just one note, using *TTTT* and then *TDDD*. (In this series of articles and videos, you can find information on articulation, to help you be sure what to do.)

Now you can practice a series of notes with *T* and *D*. Don't make it hard for yourself, but aim for maximum relaxation with each finger position and in the transitions between them. Take your time. Listen to your body (and that includes your fingers and hands), and look at yourself in the mirror if you need to.

Even as a beginner, you can add new notes to your scales as you learn those notes. Later you will combine new notes into larger intervals and arpeggios, with different articulations and finger combinations.

Methods and repertoire

Now we move on to playing written music, in order to develop reading skills and learn new pieces. There are so many beautiful melodies in the world, that you'll enjoy making great music even when you're not able to play many notes yet.

As a teacher, I tend to work with method books for at least the first couple of years with beginner students. Methods organize the repertoire for you in a didactic way—so even if you don't work with a teacher (although I highly recommend you do, because you will learn so much faster and avoid so many bad habits!), method books provide a guide that you can follow. They also target very specific technical issues.

There are methods with accompanying audio files, which provide a good tool to use to train your ear and rhythm.

Visit the ARS website and read reviews in *American Recorder* of recorder methods. Be sure to choose a method developed by a professional recorder player. Sarah Jeffery has a YouTube video about selected recorder books for beginning adults. The ARS also has a *Personal Study Program* where you will find the *Level I Music List*, including several methods for soprano and alto. If you don't have a teacher, Brian Bonsor's *Enjoy the Recorder* looks

good! Besides methods, you can always consult the first volume of *The Modern Recorder Player* by Walter van Hauwe.

From the third or fourth year, you can start to play your first sonatas. These are really beautiful, and there are so many! I recommend starting with English Baroque sonatas.

I have learned (and experienced) that, when studying a new piece, it should be played perfectly for approximately the first three times—because that is the time when your muscle memory is created, the moment when your brain forges the connections. If at this point you have played the music three times *incorrectly*, there's a big possibility that your brain has already created a false connection, a muscle memory that isn't the correct one. However, this flawed memory tends to be a sticky one, which may surface when you're nervous.

Many French Baroque pieces seem easy, and you can manage their notes quite early on. However, if you want to play them as they should be played, you need to learn the articulation for *inégalité*—*ti ti-di ti-di ti-di*, with the *di* coming on the downbeat. Utilizing this correct articulation is why French suites are better to play later.

As I mentioned before, after a year or so, you can add a second size. After three or four years you can also start playing the bass recorder—which is also an F recorder, but one with music

written in the bass clef.

From the fifth year on, you can start playing most of the repertoire. At that point, it would be good to find a copy of the original (a facsimile) of music that you play, from a website like <https://imslp.org>. Playing from the facsimile will provide you with information that a modern score doesn't: for example, the way notes are beamed together or not; the use or absence of bar lines; even notation style, which gives historical context.

Musical analysis

Playing and reading music involves knowledge of clefs, accidentals, note values, key and time signatures, etc. When you start, you will learn these music theory skills from your teacher, or with a book or online course. Later it will be really useful to know more about harmony, tonalities, genres, historical modalities, etc. I recommend that you learn these skills along with playing music on the recorder—via workshops, through self-study online or using your library's resources.

We play many different styles and genres, modern and historical. What is the story behind a piece? What is its style? How does other music from the same time and place sound? What instruments are involved?

Ask yourself while practicing: How much do I know about this music, and where can I find what I don't know?

Interaction with and listening to other recorder players

One good thing you can do is listen to recordings or watch videos of professional musicians. If you're on social media, you can also listen to and watch other recorder players and analyze their strengths and weaknesses. I suggest watching those who have had lessons, because self-taught recorder players can do unhealthy things technically. (Watch my technique videos if you haven't, and check out technique videos from other professionals on the ARS website.)

The ARS website has many play-along files, where you can first listen to all the voices, and then play the “minus one” version. Playing with accompaniments surely helps us to make a lot of progress. After a while, it would be good to play with real human beings who do things that a pre-recorded and somewhat mechanical accompaniment doesn't do.

Adapting is key when playing in an ensemble—knowing how to react when things don't go exactly as what you have in mind. Listening to others and knowing what they are playing is a fundamental skill that you develop with practice.

ARS chapters

There are a number of recorder chapters that come together periodically to play together. Some of them send the music in advance, and others prefer to go with sight-reading. A few chapters still host hybrid meetings, where you could play along with the group and learn to follow a live conductor from your home. Even if you don't feel ready to play with the ensemble yet, reach out to them, because connecting with other local recorder players will broaden your experiences and add a social dimension to your recorder playing. Perhaps there is someone who wants to play easier duets or even practice together with you! 🌟

LINKS OF INTEREST:

- Lobke Sprenkeling's web site: <https://lobke.world>
- Articles in her recorder technique series: <https://americanrecorder.org/extra>
- Videos for this series of articles: www.youtube.com/americanrecordermag
- ARS Learning Resources, <https://americanrecorder.org/resources>
- Reviews of method books: <https://americanrecorder.org/methodreviews>
- ARS Personal Study Program: <https://americanrecorder.org/psp>
- ARS chapters: <https://americanrecorder.org/chapters.php>
- ARS Play-along Library: <https://americanrecorder.org/playalong>
- ARS Facebook group: www.facebook.com/americanrecordersociety
- Sarah Jeffery and TeamRecorder: www.youtube.com/@Team_Recorder
- Music Theory resources: www.wikihow.com/Learn-Music-Theory-Online