Technique Tip: A Toolbox for Coordination of Air, Fingers and Articulation

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This article is the fourth in a series covering 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. Exercises without a recorder helped us develop solid breath support and and correct breathing techniques.

PART 2: "More on Breathing plus Posture and Hands" / AR Summer 2021
In the second installment, we continued breathing exercises using the recorder, followed by discussion of good posture, embouchure and hand position.

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

This article reviews all of the skills learned, with the goal of applying them to playing music.

When trying to work through a musical piece, it often happens that at some point the coordination among air, fingers and articulation doesn't quite sit well. This article helps you to tackle the problem by isolating the three elements and breaking them down into small comprehensible chunks—giving you the tools for greater coordination.

Let's first look at each element, and then how to combine them. It will also help to refer back to the specifics in previous articles in this series.

Air

Each note on the recorder has its own center, in which that note resonates most. Around this center we have some space to blow more or less air, and still be in tune—but in the center the recorder is most comfortable and resonates best. (For me, it is as if the sound were circling all around my head.)

In order to make a melody sound cohesive and beautiful, try to find the center of each note first and then connect the notes of the melody, always with good breath support.

I strongly recommend playing long tones every day at the beginning of your practice, aiming for the center of each note. I recommend a very slow scale of long tones—but if you don't have the time, at least go through a few low, middle and high notes. Some notes on the recorder have more space around them than others; in blowing long tones, you will discover the subtle differences about each note.

Once you have worked on finding the center of the separate notes, the next step is to connect them.

Start practicing this through intervals of seconds, and work up toward playing bigger intervals, like fifths and eventually octaves.

Begin with long note values, then speed up. The faster you go, the less

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you can focus on consciously finding the center of each note: it requires some experience in separate, long tones. Practice the change from note to note, from center to center, stitching them together.

If you don't find the center of the note immediately, you can repeat (always in a very conscious way), so that you create the right muscle memory of your breath support—or, in other words, until your body gets the feeling! You will also notice that in larger intervals, going up is quite different from going down. Going up in pitch means switching to faster air, while going down requires even better breath control as you immediately have to slow down the air.

Finally, also focus on the coordination among the different ways of blowing when playing a melody, depending on what you wish to express: not only faster or slower, but also broader or thinner air.

Fingers

In order to make sure your fingers work together, keep in mind these key points:

- Use small, efficient, relaxed, rounded movements.
- Give your brain the time to know what the fingers are doing. If it doesn't grasp the finger movements, then *name* the fingers that change.

Practicing slowly and consciously is necessary for the brain to create the correct muscle memory.

- Observe how the fingers play together like children. Who is jumping, and who is landing?
- Watch the sensation of gravity in the fingers. Lifting a finger is more work than dropping it. How does it feel?
- If one finger is late, then do the opposite in an exaggerated manner: move it far earlier than the other fingers. Shorten bit by bit the amount of time that it is early, until it moves exactly in the same moment as the other fingers. This can be useful especially in fork fingerings.
- If you repeatedly leave out one note in a scale or melody, do the opposite: elongate it a little bit more than the other notes, and work toward making it equal to the others. In this way, you make sure you don't skip that note.
- We can practice difficult combinations by playing the melody in rhythmic patterns. Start with dotted rhythms. Then play one long and two short notes. After this, try long+short patterns of 1+3, 1+4, etc.

Articulation

In order for the tongue to be agile, we need a steady air stream. Imagine it as a big river, and the tongue as a little boat floating on the river. Without air, the tongue gets stuck, just like a boat on a shallow or empty river bed. That is why we keep our breath support active, without dropping it between notes: we must keep the core muscles engaged all the time. Even when playing staccato notes, we cannot drop breath support.

Before using any type of articulation, a good exercise is to slur a melody before playing it tongued. In this way, you check whether your breath support is consistent, laying the base for a light and efficient articulation.

A great tip for practicing combinations of *T* and *D* is the wonderful study book, *The Complete Articulator* by Kees Boeke. Start with the second part rather than the chromatic first part. Once learned by heart, it can be used as a daily warmup.

The key is that the *D* articulation interrupts, but does not shut off, the stream of air, whereas the *T* does. This means that when playing *TDDD TDDD*, the tongue must shut off the end of the last note in order to prepare for the *T*, in a fraction of a second. This is tricky, and should be practiced in a very conscious and slow manner.

If you have trouble with combinations of articulations in a piece you play, or in their coordination with the fingers, first try playing them on the same note. A good exercise is to play certain combinations in groups of three or four (or any convenient number), and then jump to the next note. In this way, you could make a scale of a repeated articulation pattern.

Now we are ready to consider how to coordinate the techniques on which we have been working.

Air + fingers

If we work on changes in the air stream when playing different combinations of notes, first we can merely focus on the air. The second step is to focus on the coordination between the air and the fingers, making sure that changes happen simultaneously. Especially when playing intervals that are jumps, this can be challenging. It is essential to practice them with maximum relaxation: this is what your body will remember!

Air + articulation

Since air is essential for a light and precise articulation, when working on articulation we automatically include its coordination with air. There are some more detailed things to explore further in this section:

- how does air help with soft articulation in the higher notes, or in jumps?
- how do we control air when playing staccato?

Remember it's always a question of sensing and listening.

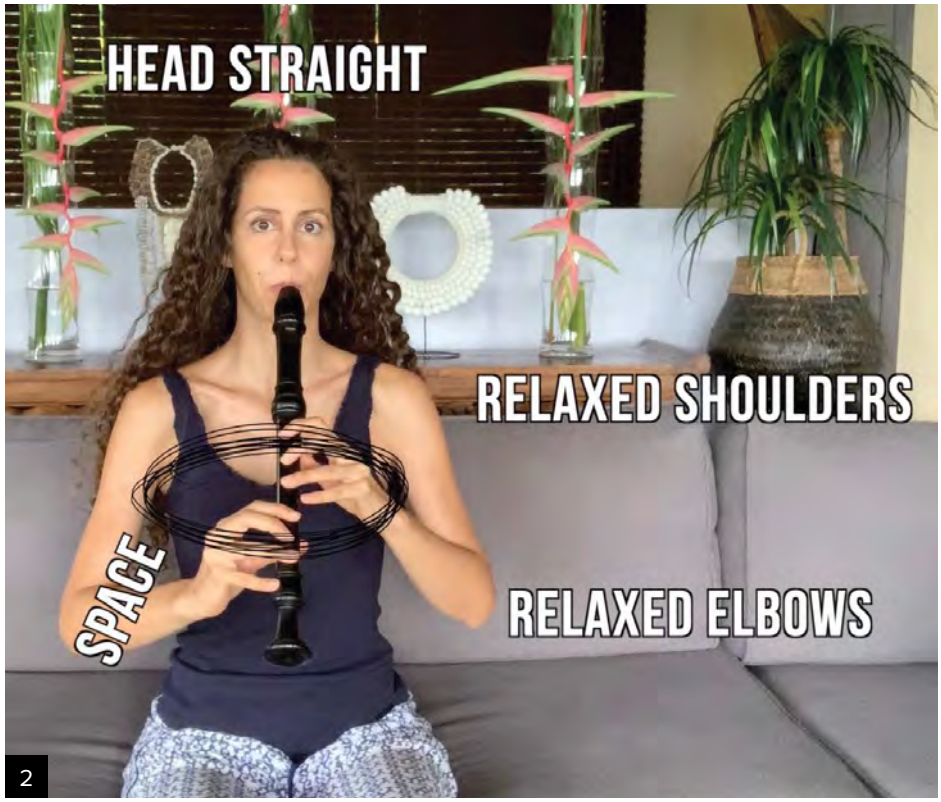
In *The Complete Articulator*, Boeke shows very well that the *T* doesn't have to be on a strong beat. How do you show that a note is on the strong beat of the bar if it doesn't have a strong articulation? It is about the subtle energy of the air, flowing toward the strong beat *without* pushing the note or losing the center of the note. To do this, we learn how different combinations of air and articulation can be coordinated.

Articulation + fingers

As with all aspects of coordination, the first time you practice something, do it slowly and consciously, so that your brain has the time to encode the right muscle memory.

Some important tips for this combination:

- Be aware that the tongue should follow the fingers, because our fingers are just a bit more precise than the tongue.
- Relax as much as possible. While the air support is steady and strong (which can support the softest, slowest air), the fingers and tongue are light and small. Relax your shoulders and think of your posture.
- Be as conscious as possible of everything you are doing. It is important to stay as relaxed as you are able, because as soon as you tense up, you are working against yourself.



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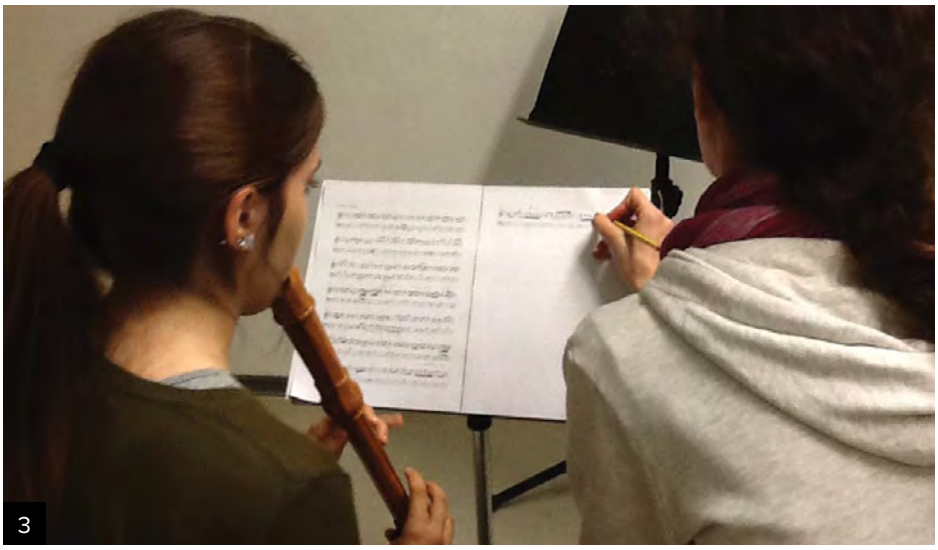
1: Rounded movements in the middle fingers. Efficient and relaxed.

2: A review of good posture. Be conscious of your body, and try to relax as much as possible, so that you create the correct muscle memory.

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**
- Lobke Sprenkeling's video demonstrating this article: **https://youtu.be/aNYN7HhSIwQ**
- Videos for this entire series of articles: **www.youtube.com/americanrecordermag**



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- Work with different rhythm patterns (dotted rhythm, 1+2, 1+3, etc.).
- If you're using double tonguing such as *dege* in a fast passage: invert the articulation (*gede*) and check that it's still synchronized with the fingers.

Coordination in a musical piece

Finally we've arrived at the point of combining the three elements when studying a musical piece!

Here are some tips to help you along the way:

- Find out where something works and where it doesn't. Awareness does half the job!
- Isolate the part where it doesn't work. First make sure the fingers are well coordinated and that you relax as much as possible. Find out which elements are not coordinated (air, fingers, articulations) and work on them separately.
- Work with rhythm patterns.
- Make sure you are able to concentrate, listening and feeling intensely, so you can detect not only where an element isn't working, but also why. Regularly stop and notice how it feels. This allows you to correct rapidly, becoming very precise with minimal effort. It is actually a highly mindful practice, which can be very pleasant!

With this toolbox you can now start working toward that perfect coordination!

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3: Lobke Sprenkeling (right, at top) works with a student to coordinate elements of technique in a musical piece.

4: The effort of coordinating air, fingers and articulation results in a satisfying musical performance.