



WAOSA
WEST AUSTRALIAN ORFF-SCHULWERK ASSOCIATION

The Recorder or Not the Recorder?

'Why should I bother to teach recorder in my class? It's a waste of time! It relates to nothing....'

What a sorry situation! All this fuss over a cylindrical pipe with mouthpiece, block, window, finger holes and a very fine pedigree. *The Oxford Dictionary* states that the English name *recorder* tells us that there was once no better instrument with which to record a tune in the old sense of recalling it to mind and repeating it. *Nicholas Lander* in his article *Instrument of Torture or Instrument of Music* states that the earliest illustration of a recorder is in *the mocking of Jesus* (after 1315), a fresco from a Church of Staro Nagoricvino, near Kumanova in Macedonia, in which a musician plays a cylindrical duct-flute, the window/labium of which is clearly visible. *The Grove Dictionary* states that the recorder dates back in time to Medieval times when bird catchers created whistles, out of animal bones to imitate birds. It seems... that... the recorder may have had practical and simple beginnings, historians may not agree, however, may it not be possible that these practicalities could be related to Education in the 21st Century?

We need to consider the use of the recorder in the Schulwerk. Why was it made a part of the instrumentarium? Carl Orff believed that music should be made accessible to all. To do that he used elemental processes that incorporated, body percussion, singing, playing, movement and speech. The malleted instruments cannot provide the legato line that a vocal or a wind instrument can, which lends the instrument beautifully to accompany movement and dance. In learning a wind instrument students learn to articulate the breath, controlling it to make music intertwined with other parts and other pitched recorders. (*Four Part Harmony*) Recorder playing encourages finger dexterity, listening, pitching, tonguing which then can provide a contrast to the malleted instruments.

We could take this idea of an elemental wind instrument a little further and consider that many cultures across the world have some sort of wind instrument as part of their cultural heritage...we have our own extraordinary indigenous didgeridoo, that has deep connections to mother earth and ceremony that is unique to Aboriginal culture. There is an extraordinary amount of unique wind instruments found throughout cultures across the world ...for example: Chinese dizi, Polynesian hano (*Nose Flute*), Arabic ney, Indian bansuri, Scottish bagpipes, Irish penny whistle...historically all these wind instruments have significant cultural importance. Given that Orff was inspired by the African Marimba and the Indonesian Gamelan, we could argue that the recorder was considered a

wind instrument to represent the deep connections cultures have to the expression of the breath of life.

So, let's now consider why the recorder has been so maligned? Why is it... because it is considered so easy to play? Could it be ignorance or is it because from about 1750 the recorder as a solo instrument was completely lost and wasn't revived until the end of the 19th century. (*150 years is a long time*). Did it miss the traditions of the piano, violin and other woodwind instruments because of this void? *Walter van Hauwe* in his book *The Modern Recorder Player Volume 1*, suggested this as a problem for the instrument. He also discusses the problem of there being a "quick fix" approach to the teaching of recorder. In the education world he says that most recorder methods are often based on getting instant results by delivering a short explanation as to the position of the hands, covering the holes with fingers and thumb and a tune can be produced immediately... parents and teachers are thrilled because '*little Johnny*' can play a tune!!! It is necessary for children to have success but ...van Hauwe considers this a big problem for the instrument in the long term as time is not spent on the positions of the thumbs in both the left and right hand for example. Later when lessons are sought from a professional player a great deal of unlearning must be done. This can be very frustrating for the student. The recorder is often used as a steppingstone for other woodwind instruments and similar problems can develop for these instruments too. Children can think that they will be able to play a tune as quickly on a clarinet, oboe, flute or even a trumpet. We all know this takes time on these instruments. Why not on the recorder?

Could it also be that the simple nature of the instrument generates a feeling of being easy and anyone could play. That's a wonderful and esoteric feeling to generate. It's a bit like singing. Everyone knows when someone sings like an angel but too few understand the effort and hours of practice that has gone into making that voice. The painter learns his or her craft as do the doctor, baker, and candlestick maker who all must do their time. So too has the recorder teacher.

As with everything there should be some skills and some standards and expectations of both teachers and students. Why was it that I waited until I was in my 40's to have individual lessons on the instrument I had played since I was 12?

One could ponder these questions till the end of time. The essence... tomorrow is another day, and we have made a commitment to ourselves and our students. We are working in the classroom now. The attitude to the recorder in our classes is going to change.

Recorder from now on is going to be a credible instrument and these are some ideas to help changing attitudes.

- Start having a few individual lessons yourself, there are many good players and teachers in Perth. Contact the *Recorder and Early Music Society of Western Australia* PO Box 879, Claremont 6910 WA.

- Start listening to good players such as Michela Petra, Hans Martin Linde, Frans Bruggen, Zana Clarke (Australia) to name but a few. There are many...many more as well as many fantastic recorder groups in Australia and around the world.
- Check out the "Recorder Home Page" Web Master Nicholas S. Lander.
- Use echo techniques teaching to students, encouraging them to listen to the sound that can be produced. G and E are the first two notes I teach as the E centers the right hand and stops bad habits developing. There are some great rhymes around that could be used as rhythms to play on single notes, makes this fun. *Carol King Recorder Routes* has lots of Orff ideas that help the teaching of the recorder in the classroom and incorporates the Orff Instruments.
- Never allow children to have their hands around the wrong way be vigilant about this. (*Do you ever see a violin played the wrong way round?*)
- Teach breath control and how much air is needed to blow down the instrument. I use a tuner to help. Buy an electronic tuner or download an app and encourage the children to tune to it as this is a great way for the children to develop an understanding about pitch on the recorder and makes them realize straight way how much breath is needed. They can see the sound waves.
- Ask the students to do lots of *du's* on the pieces being taught, using the rhythms, before the melody is taught as this really opens the upper palate.
- Teach tonguing, placement of the tongue behind the teeth.
- Teach legato and staccato playing.
- Encourage musical playing, phrasing, attention to dynamics.
- Think about intonation.
- Co-ordination for children. Think through some of the finger changes you are asking the children to make and rehearse them before the piece is learnt so the children have a positive experience.
- Try teaching difficult parts in the piece first, using them as an exercise then put the piece together.
- Make sure you have standard instruments in your class and not lots of different brands that children have bought from home. Make sure they are all in tune with each other.
- Don't allow children to swap instruments: hygiene is an issue in our society. The only way you can successfully sterilize instruments is to autoclave them..... not possible ...the plastic would melt!! Therefore, children should buy their own instruments and parents should be made aware of this situation. (*I think everyone gets it with covid now!*)
- Remember the descants lowest note is C
- and the treble is F. Don't try and confuse children by making up systems using descant fingerings for the treble. Teach the treble as a new instrument. John Heyward's book *With treble and Descants* gives a practical way of combining the two instruments for the beginner in the classroom Action Music is a good contact for this book.
- At the Orff Conference ELEVANCOS in 2000, Dr Ulrike Jungmair used the recorder to teach her melodic lines. What better way to model those possibilities in children: try doing that sometimes.
- I would highly recommend Walter van Hauwe *The Modern Recorder Player Vol 1 Ed12150 Schott*. He is very clear in his descriptions of hand positions, sitting, standing positions, mouth position and intonation.

These are just a few ideas that might help the reader to consider making some changes as to how one teaches the recorder. Have fun, and never stop learning!

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