Learning the basics on recorder

Some historical data

The recorder has a rich and remarkable history that spans 700 years. Most modern recorders are based on instruments from the Baroque period, the so-called Baroque-type recorders. In the early part of the 20th century Peter Harlan developed a recorder with simpler fingering known as German-type recorder. The principal difference in fingering is for “F” and “B♭”. Even simpler, German fingering has been criticized for having poorer tuning of sharps and flats. Here we are presenting the most common recorder, which is the Baroque-type.

True recorders is thought to be evolved in the 14th century, but an earlier origin is a matter of some debate. The earliest recorders were designed to be played either right-handed or left-handed. The players would fill in the hole they didn’t want to use with wax. The recorder achieved great popularity in the 16th and 17th centuries. During the Renaissance musical instruments were used in dance music or as accompaniment to the voice. Many instruments survive from this era including an incomplete set of recorders in Nuremberg dated from the 16th century. Unlike the Baroque recorders used today the Renaissance recorders have a wide, more or less cylindrical bore.

Several changes in recorders took place in the 17th century which allowed baroque players to play two full chromatic octaves of notes and to produce a sweeter sound. Its commonly occurred name was, rather confusingly, flute.

The instrument went into decline after the 18th century and superceded by the flute and clarinet. Recorder was revived around the turn of the 20th century but was limited to early music repertoire. The eventual revival of the recorder is attributed to modern composers lived in UK.

The use of recorder in the classroom

The manufacturing of plastic recorders in the mid 20th century led to the introduction of this instrument into the general music classroom. Recorders became very popular in schools, as they are one of the cheapest instrument to buy and relatively easy to play as they are pre-tuned. The known composer and music educator Carl-Orff is closely related to its introduction into schools. Throughout the Orff-Schulwerk volumes Music for Children we can find musical examples which take advantage of the melodic and ensemble possibilities of the instrument. The recorder is the perfect complement to the tonebar ensemble and voices, for even a beginning player can accompany with an ostinato or improvise on a few tones.

Recorder range

Recorders are made in a variety of sizes. So even though each recorder had a range of only 2 octaves, a recorder ensemble can play across 7 octaves. Most of the notes in the second octave and above are produced by partially closing the thumbhole on the back of the recorder, a technique known as “pinching”. To play these notes, the player must blow harder in order to excite the second and third
harmonics of the instrument. Recorders are most often tuned in C and F, meaning their lowest note is a C or an F. The recorders most often used for solo music are the soprano and alto ones. The largest recorders are less often used, since they are expensive and not easy to handle. In the following table the range of the most usually played recorders is shown:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instruments in C</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Instruments in F</th>
<th>Range</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>soprano (descant)</td>
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<td>sopranino</td>
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<tr>
<td>tenor</td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="tenor_range" /></td>
<td>alto (treble)</td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="alto_range" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>great bass (bass in C)</td>
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<td>contra bass</td>
<td><img src="image6" alt="contra_bass_range" /></td>
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**A Description of your recorder**

The recorder comes in three parts known as joints:

- The top part which called the head joint (where one blows into)
- The main body of the recorder with most of the finger holes (called the body joint)
- The bottom part which had the last finger hole (called the foot joint). Be careful to turn it accordingly so as to be slightly turned to one side and not aligned with the other holes.

In some recorders all three parts are joined together as one piece.

**How the sound is produced**
The recorder is held somewhat outwards from the player’s lips. The player’s breath is constrained by a wooden “block” [A] in the mouthpiece of the instrument and travels along a duct called the “windway” [B]. The air coming out of the windway strikes a sharp edge called the “labium” [C]. This process produces the sound. The roughly rectangular opening at the front of the recorder’s headpiece, which includes the labium, is called the “window”. The pitch of the note produced is related to the length of the air column and is modified by finger holes in the front and a thumb hole at the back of the instrument.

**How to take care of your instrument**

The first rule is to never touch the labium which produces the sound. In case the labium is damaged, the whole instrument is useless. If the windway gets blocked with moisture, you should blow hard without touching the labium. If this doesn’t work, poke a feather into the windway (when you purchase a recorder this feather is usually included). When assembling your recorder use a gentle twisting action. And one last piece of advice: remember to dry your instrument after use. This is a good practice for plastic recorders and essential for wooden ones! If you do have a wooden recorder you should also occasionally oil the inside of the instrument with linseed oil (you may purchase suitable oil from the music shops).