

A guide to the Recorder (Oct 2023)

The Recorder is an amazing instrument although many people think of it as little more than a toy.

The common Recorder that children start on is the **Descant Recorder** (sometimes referred to as the Soprano Recorder). The basic student Descant Recorder is made of plastic and has no keys – the player blows into the Recorder and covers or uncovers the finger holes (tone-holes) to sound different notes. More advanced instruments are made of wood and can cost hundreds of pounds. Larger members of the Recorder family, such as the Bass Recorder, will have keys that cover some of the tone-holes and may have a metal pipe called a 'crook' to blow into instead of the type of mouthpiece (fipple) found on a Descant Recorder.

Young children usually take up the Descant Recorder at age 7 or 8. As an introduction to music (and wind instruments in particular) it is excellent. The beginner plastic instrument is small, light, cheap, and robust, and easily stands up to the demands of Primary school life. Children who have made reasonable progress on the Descant Recorder might also learn the **Treble Recorder** (sometimes referred to as the Alto Recorder) – this Recorder is about 1½ times the size of a Descant but looks identical. The only difference for the player is that the holes sound different notes so it takes a while for the player to learn to read music written for Treble Recorder.

Unfortunately most people associate the sound of the Recorder with groups of beginners playing out of tune – and just when children do start to sound more tuneful they tend to move onto other wind instruments that seem more exciting; however, just like all other musical instruments, if the player perseveres with the instrument the sound improves - a wooden student instrument in the hands of even a grade 3 player can sound lovely.

Recorder music in schools

One great advantage of the Recorder over other instruments is the cost. Because the instruments are so cheap and require very little maintenance (beyond cleaning, which can be done by the children themselves) it is possible for schools to equip many children and also to buy larger and smaller Recorders to create a '**Recorder consort**' consisting of Sopranino, Descant, Treble, and Tenor (the Bass Recorder is too big for primary school children but would be useful in secondary school for the more standard consort of Descant, Treble, Tenor, and Bass). There is plenty of music arranged for various combinations of Recorders.

A child who has mastered the Descant Recorder can also play the **Tenor Recorder** which is twice the length of the Descant and so sounds an Octave lower; the written music appears the same for both instruments. For a player who wants to buy a plastic Tenor recorder there is the issue of whether their fingers can comfortably cover the holes – the spacing of the tone-holes on Tenor Recorders (whether plastic or wood) varies far more than on the smaller recorders; the simplest design of a Tenor Recorder is basically a Descant Recorder doubled in size, but there are variations on this, for example: the plastic Aulos 211A model has the tone-holes spaced slightly closer together for smaller hands whereas the plastic Aulos 511B model has standard tone-holes spacing but has keys for the bottom two notes (both models have a 'clip on' thumb-rest). No longer manufactured but possibly available second-hand is the Dolmetsch plastic 'knicked' Tenor (Nova N301K) where the body is angled to bring the hands closer to the body. Bear in mind that these variations in design will also affect other aspects of the instrument – in particular the loudness.

A child who has mastered the Treble can also play the **Sopranino Recorder** which is half the length of the Treble and so plays an Octave higher; the written music appears the same for both instruments.

In an ensemble it is best if all the children play the same make and model of Recorder – (particularly if they are beginners) because this helps the ensemble sound more in tune with itself.

- Sopranino -6 fingers sounds G; lowest note F referred to as F sounding F5 one octave higher than written. *Suitable for primary school children who can play the Treble.*
- Descant -6 fingers sounds D; lowest note C referred to as C sounding C5 one octave higher than written; also called 'Soprano' although its range is an octave higher than the Soprano voice and other Soprano instruments. *Suitable for primary school children.*
- Treble -6 fingers sounds G; lowest note F referred to as F sounding F4 as written (on Treble clef); also called 'Alto' although its range is an octave higher than the Alto voice and other Alto instruments. *Suitable for primary school children.*
- Tenor -6 fingers sounds D; lowest note C referred to as C sounding middle C(4) on piano; sounds as written (on Treble clef); although it is referred to as a Tenor its range is an octave higher than the Tenor voice and other Tenor instruments. The Tenor recorder is available straight, or angled (knicked) to make some of the tone-holes easier to reach. There is also the option of keys for the Low C/C# notes and sometimes an adjustable thumb-rest. *Suitable for older Primary school children who can play the Descant.*
- Bass (F) -6 fingers sounds G; lowest note F referred to as F sounding F3 below middle C; usually written in Bass clef but sounds an Octave higher; although referred to as a Bass its range is an octave higher than the Bass voice and other Bass instruments.

The traditional Bass mouthpiece 'beak' (where the player's lips are placed) is flat ended, rather than scalloped like a Descant or Treble, and can be either 'direct' - where the player blows straight into the flat top of the instrument or 'capped' - in which case the player blows into a short cap fitted over the flat top of the instrument (this allows for the 'window' to face outward and the sound to project more). There are two modern alternatives to the flat beak; a 'knicked' instrument with a scalloped beak which is the same as a knicked Tenor only larger - this makes the tone-holes easier to reach and projects the sound forward; or a capped Bass fitted with a curved pipe (a 'crook' or 'bocal') for the player to blow into, again this is to make the tone-holes easier to reach and to project the sound forward. Bass Recorders usually have 3 or 4 keys. *Not suitable for Primary school children but useful in Secondary schools.*

Types of Recorder

Recorders can be divided into 4 types – modern student, Baroque, Renaissance, and Contemporary. All plastic recorders and the cheaper wooden recorders are modern recorders designed to function well but not to reproduce exactly the sound of the Baroque, Renaissance, or Contemporary period.

Categories of instruments

Modern student Recorders can be divided into four categories.

Plastic student instruments: cheap plastic Recorders are abundant but many are manufactured as toys rather than instruments and have poor tuning. The recommended manufacturers of student plastic Recorders are Aura, Aulos, Dolmetsch (only available second-hand), Moeck, Mollenhauer, Triebert, Yamaha, and Zen-on. Most manufacture more than one student model; the price range being approximately £8 - £40 for a Descant Recorder (£22 - £60 for a Treble). The more expensive student models have a simulated wood finish and can actually sound better but the cheaper models are adequate.

Combination plastic and wooden student instruments: Moeck and Mollenhauer manufacture student instruments with plastic heads and wooden bodies; the advantage of the wooden body is that the instrument produces a better tone. A plastic head is still used because it is less prone to being blocked by the excessive moisture that beginners tend to blow into the instrument.

Wooden student instruments: there are several manufacturers of wooden student instruments including Aura, Fehr, Hopf, Dolmetsch (only available second-hand), Kobliczek, Kung, Moeck, Mollenhauer, Yamaha, and Zamra. The wood used is either Maple (sometimes stained) or a European fruit wood such as Pearwood. These instruments definitely produce a better tone than a plastic instrument but require more effort to play; also because the mouthpiece is wood they are more vulnerable to blocking due to excessive moisture produced by novice players. Wooden student Recorders are more suitable for grade three players and above. Dolmetsch recommends Pear, Maple, and Sycamore for ensemble work.

Professional instruments: there are several companies manufacturing professional instruments including: Aura, Coolsma, Kobliczek, Kung, Marsyas, Moeck, Mollenhauer, and Yamaha. There are also many individual makers such as: Blezinger, Cranmore, Netsch, Paetzold, Prizant, Ran, Takeyama, von Huene, and Wenner. Professional Recorders are made of more expensive wood (such as varieties of Boxwood and Rosewood) these woods are denser and harder than Maple or Pearwood and therefore more stable, and the maker can shape the tone-holes and bore more precisely. The wood used also influences the sound produced: Dolmetsch recommends Rosewood, Satinwood, and European Boxwood for ensemble (or solo work); and Grenadilla for solo work; other makers also recommend Ebony for solo work.

Play-testing a Recorder before purchase

For a complete beginner this is impossible – just buy a plastic student instrument from one of the recommended manufacturers.

For a player who has progressed to grade three and is looking to upgrade to a wooden student instrument (Descant or Treble) it is worth testing 3 or 4 models to see which the player prefers – I recommend a visit to a specialist shop that keeps a range of instruments from different manufacturers.

Whatever the ability of the player the most important thing is to warm the instrument up correctly before play-testing it - *do not blow into the instrument* – this will immediately create condensation in the instrument and distort the tuning - instead hold the instrument in your hand for a few minutes to warm it up. When you are comparing instruments make sure you warm each one each time before you play it, and when you put the instrument down to try another, make sure it is resting with its **finger holes uppermost**.

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