

# **Recorders – making a start with young children**

by Len Tyler

Here are some thoughts regarding starting the recorder with young children. Within the Len Tyler Music School we do start recorders from year 1 but as an integral part of their music lesson rather than a standalone recorder session or recorder club. Recorders are included for a short period most weeks and incorporated into ensemble playing with classroom percussion. Some time ago we did start in year R which was successful but we felt that the time spent on recorders at that age was better spent on other musicianship training.

1. Before starting to actually work on the recorder it's important to establish some musicianship training. Ideally this will include the following:
  - a. Rhythm work – using rhythm solfa Ta, Ti-ti, (perhaps also Tiki-tiki etc..) Other rhythm sounds like Ta, Ta-te, Tafi-tefi or Ta, Ta-te, Tiri-tiri are also useful but the use of Tiki-tiki does lay the foundations of double tonguing by training the muscles of the tongue which could be considered more useful for playing wind instruments, including recorder. The children will need to be able to read basic rhythm flash cards using the elements Ta, Ti-ti, (possibly Tiki-tiki and Sh). Once established replace the Sh with a silent small nod of the head, and then replace the small nod with just thinking the silence.
  - b. Pitch work – using solfa to learn a bank of s-m, (later l-s-m and m-r-d) songs. Ideally the children should be able to read simple s-m material from stick notation.
2. Once the ground work is done as above you can then start with the recorder as follows
  - a. Ideally have all children using the same recorder. Personally I recommend the Aulos 205 which has two white rings, one at the top and one at the bottom.

- b. Have the children stand in a line shoulder to shoulder and facing forward. Teacher then stands at the end of the children's left.
- c. Teach the children that there is only one rule in the whole of recorder playing – “Don't play until I say”. If this rule is administered well and in a positive and friendly way it will help with group management.
- d. Have the children point to you with the finger nearest to you (index finger of the left hand) while holding the recorder in the other hand. Give pointy finger a little bite.
- e. Teacher then goes to the front of the class and asks the children to give that finger another little bite. The brain remembers the bite so this can be repeated as often as is necessary. This approach is more efficient than saying “left hand at the top – no the other left hand ..!”
- f. Children then stand correctly (feet a shoulder's width apart, shoulders relaxed and in a good posture). If sitting then the posture is the same but just bend at the knees and hips. Place the “bitey” finger at the top on the top ring (no fingers on the finger holes yet) and the right hand on the white ring at the bottom of the recorder. If you are not using an Aulos 205 then have a look at the picture of one on line to see where the fingers need to be placed. Then place the tip of the recorder on the chin (not in the mouth just yet) with the recorder sticking out at the correct angle. Use this activity to establish good posture and good arm position as well as getting the recorder to be held at a suitable angle slightly away from the body.
- g. Have the children copy exactly what the teacher does. The teacher then speaks a series of simple four beat rhythms using Ta and Ti-ti = children echo. These should be rhythms that the children have worked on previously and kept very simple.
- h. Tell the children to turn off the voice so the echo rhythm works is done as a whisper.
- i. Change the vowel sound from Ta/Ti-t to the “oo” sound to give To/To-to still with the recorder on the chin.

- j. Have the children put the recorder into their mouth and repeat the sequence of children echoing children copying a series of four beat rhythms as described above. If the ground work has been done then the Tiki-tiki rhythm can be included (as too-koo-too-koo) at this level. Please note that the children are still not covering any holes on the recorder. This is all done with an open recorder but the correct posture and arm positions are becoming established. With a set of matched recorders the tuning can be worked on by getting them to all “blow” the same to make it all sound nice.
- k. Once basic echo work copying the teacher is established then the teacher turns away from the children so that they can’t see what is being done and echo work continues. Actually there is nothing to see anyway but this does develop aural awareness and a sense of achievement in the children.
- l. Once the above has been done successfully then children can read flash cards with whatever rhythms they have learned. At this point it should be clear that they can perform Ta, Ti-ti, Tiki-tiki, Sh and possibly Ta-a by echo and reading from flash cards, still with an open recorder – not fingers yet. Important at this point to get across to parents, other teachers etc. what you are doing and why so that they don’t expect their little darlings to be playing “London’s burning” badly and out of tune but that they are learning to play music well, in tune and with good balance while actually reading music.
- m. Once the above is established get the children to close their eyes and slowly slide the left hand down the recorder until they can feel a hole with the left thumb (same hand as the bitey finger) and then, still with the eyes closed, feel for one hole with the “bitey” finger thereby establishing the fingering for B (could be called “Bitey B” if you like. Doing this with closed eyes develops a sense of feel and touch for fingering work and avoids children looking for the holes etc.. The above sequence of echo work, echo work with the teacher turning away and flash card reading can now be done on a B. If the

previous ground work has been done, everything to this point can be done on the first recorder session within 10-15 minutes.

- n. Once the note B is established and secure then children are asked to close their eyes and find the second hole to produce an A. Simple echo work and flash card reading using B or A continues until secure. Teacher then performs simple echo patterns using both e.g. BBAA for the children to copy. Note that it is easier to go down from B to A than it is to go up from A to B. No need to tell them what to do, just get them to copy thereby developing their aural awareness. Repeat this activity but turning away so the children can't actually see the teacher's fingers move. Children can then read rhythm flash cards on either note. Other music games can follow like reading rhythm flashcards with a B for all the Tas and an A for all the Ti-tis. Further development can be made by using flash cards with a single line. Blobs on the line for B and below the line for A. Sticks can be added to give rhythm to the pitch work.
- o. Once the note A is established the children can then be asked to copy the teacher by raising and lowering the "Bitey" finger (to produce a C). They can then be told that the new note is a C. Once established all the previous work can be repeated using the new note and at this point s-m material can be used. Any simple s-m song can be performed perhaps (e.g. up and down and up and down, this is the way to London Town – tells the "bitey B finger" exactly what to do) with a simple accompaniment provide on classroom percussion (Notes from the F Major triad on a xylophone/metalophone played as a pulse – simple ostinato performed on claves etc.) The use of a one line stave can be used for reading with B on the line, A below and C above.
- p. The note G can be taught in a similar way using a combination of echo work and flash card reading. For pitch reading then a two line stave can be used with B on the top line, A in the space and G on the bottom line and C just above the top line.

- q. *For the more advanced and confident teacher the note G can be used and the raising and lowering of the “Bitey” finger produces an alternate fingering for the note B. This fingering is useful in producing the B to C movement as it avoids cross fingering. For the advanced pupil this is the fingering to use for a B-C trill. Teachers need to decide whether to include this element in their teaching and if so at what point.*
- r. Note learning sequence can then include D (which allows lsm work on DCA). Continuing to hold the bottom of the recorder (on the white ring) with the right hand help to keep things stable while continuing to teach good right hand position.
- s. E can be taught as an additional note thereby giving the notes C B A G E to work with. So Mi and La So Mi material can then be done in G Major and C major (lays the foundation of transposition for later) and Mi Re Do material can be done in G major. Other simple material (Pease pudding hot etc.) can then be developed. Reading from a three line stave would be the next step with E on the bottom line up to C above the top line. F is not yet included as the fingering on the recorders in UK is not so easy.
- t. Once low D is introduced there are enough notes to do songs with low La and low So extension work (e.g. Old MacDonald’s Farm – good for low So and La)
- u. Once Low D is established the pointy finger from the right hand can be raised to produce F#. At this point So Mi material can be revisited using A – F# or La So Mi work using B A F# etc. Mi Re Do work can then be done using F# E D (Welcome everybody is a good number for this with it’s Mi Do Mi Do etc. ending which has the pointy finger of the right hand just going up and down.
- v. At this point the children will know all the notes of G major from D to D and will be able to play various s-m, l-s-m and m-r-d material in various keys.

I hope the above thoughts and ideas are useful.

Len Tyler 22 March 2017