

## Part 1: Technical Skills – physical mechanics of playing; Musical Skills – intonation/listening, reading music

Stage	Tone	Fingers	Tongue	Breathing	Intonation and Listening Skills	Recorder Sizes	Sight Reading	Clefs	Playing by Ear
Lowest	Has not yet developed awareness of tone; tone scratchy, airy, uneven, too soft/loud, harsh; lack of support	Fingers stiff, tight, inflexible, gripping; hand position awkward; finger movement awkward, stumbling; unsure of fingering	Has difficulty controlling tongue; not yet aware of the various syllables; air leaks, noises, tongue flapping; too much force/limp tongue; slow tongue	Has not developed awareness of breathing and where to breathe; shallow/high breathing; loud breathing; breathes through nose; can play only short phrases	Has not yet developed awareness of intonation; not yet able to adjust pitch; not yet able to hear other players in the group	Plays one size of recorder	Does not yet read music, or still very insecure in reading music	Reads only one clef; reads only modern notation	Not yet able to play by ear, or very insecure playing by ear
1									
2									
3									
4									
5									
6									
	Aware of tone; in process of improving tone through practice and learning; able to hold fairly steady long tones; able to play fine arches in chains of 20; developing support; learning to control pitch when making dynamic differences	Developing free and natural hand position; fingers usually relaxed; developing smooth and fluid finger motion through consistent practice; finger co-ordination good; can play fairly rapidly	Able to pronounce "t" and "d" cleanly and with fair rapidity, singly and in combinations; beginning to learn "r" and/or double-tonguing	Able to keep breaths low; breaths quieter; breathing more efficiently; aware of importance of choosing good breathing spots, and able to make fairly good choices; increasing length of phrases	Becoming aware of intonation, even if not always able to tell whether flat or sharp; able to adjust pitch to a degree; aware of other players, even if not always able to hear all parts at once	Able to play S, A, T, B recorders fluently	Fluent in reading treble and bass clefs; able to read music of fair complexity, variety of note values	Fluent in treble and bass clefs; beginning to learn to read Baroque or Renaissance notations	Able to sound out tunes by ear; starting to improvise; able to memorize short tunes
7									
8									
9									
10									
11									
12									
Best	Aware of tone and tone color; clear, pure and steady tone; in control of support; full range of vibrato; flexible dynamics with control of pitch	Sure of all fingerings; hand position enables free motion; finger motion fluid, economical, rapid and precise	Precise control of tongue position and movement at all speeds; clean, noiseless motion; able to produce and use all syllables, both modern and historical	Control of all forms and positions of breathing; breaths silent, through mouth; economical use of breath allowing long phrases; breaths placed according to musical content rather than lack of air	Fine intonation discernment; able to control and adjust pitch; aware of, and listens to, all other musicians in the group	Plays all sizes of recorders including those in F, C, G, D, etc; plays Baroque, Renaissance, Medieval recorders with historical fingerings; knows how to learn any new fingering system	Reads modern notation well; can play with facility at first sight	Reads G, F and C clefs; reads Baroque notation, Renaissance notations; reads early Renaissance and Medieval notations	Able to play tunes by ear; able to improvise in many styles; able to memorize entire pieces

Part 2: Musical Skills – rhythm, phrasing, ensemble playing; repertoire, musical styles, expression

	Rhythm	Phrasing	Keeping Place	Repertoire	Knowledge of musical styles; Ornamentation	Expression
Lowest	Weak sense of pulse; knows only basic rhythms consisting of whole, half, quarter and eighth notes; taps foot unawares	Not yet aware of phrasing; not yet able to recognize where one phrase ends and a new one begins	Unused to playing with others; loses place frequently; difficulty finding place again	Not yet aware of repertoire; knows only material in beginning book	Not yet aware of musical styles and forms; not yet aware of ornamentation styles	Not yet able to play in an expressive manner; mechanical playing; notes all equally weighted; lack of dynamic differences; musical direction unclear
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
	Sense of pulse fairly secure; able to read rhythms that include up to 16th notes; taps foot only as a tool for learning difficult rhythms – aware of doing so	Learning to recognize phrases in various types of music; able to recognize hemiola patterns and cadences	Plays with others in various ensemble types; gets lost from time to time, but not frequently; able to find place again, for the most part	Knows a number of recorder sonatas and/or consort pieces; learning music from more than one time period or musical genre	Learning about Baroque national styles; able to apply basic Baroque ornaments and make basic Renaissance divisions	Able to make flowing lines; beginning to vary weight and emphasis of notes; beginning to use dynamic differences and articulations for effect; able to decide on own interpretation in a Baroque sonata
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12						
Best	Secure sense of pulse and subdivision; does not tap foot or bob with beat; able to read and play any rhythm; able to figure out new rhythms	Aware of and understands phrasing in all types of music	Experienced at playing with others; rarely loses place, and if so, finds place again quickly	Knows many pieces; can be ready to perform a full-length concert program at any time	Understanding of elements of musical styles for all historical periods; knowledge of Baroque national styles; able to ornament fluently, extempore, in the Baroque and Renaissance styles	Brings all techniques together for expressive playing; knows which notes to emphasize, which to lighten; can play a phrase using several different interpretations; clear use of, and ability to alter, musical direction

## SCHOLARSHIPS

for recorder players to attend recorder/early music

## SUMMER WORKSHOPS

applications must be postmarked by April 15;

for recorder players to attend recorder/early music

## WEEKEND WORKSHOPS

throughout the year, apply two months before funding is needed.

Workshop scholarships are made possible by memorial funds established to honor Andrew Acs, Jennifer Wedgwood Lehmann and Margaret DeMarsh.

**AMERICAN RECORDER SOCIETY**  
 1129 Ruth Dr.  
 St. Louis, MO 63122  
 U.S.A.  
 800-491-9588  
 314-966-4649 (fax)  
 recorder@americanrecorder.org

# How to Rate Yourself as a Recorder Player

by Frances Blaker and Letitia Berlin

As workshop season approaches, it will soon be time to choose classes for one or more of the many workshops being offered this summer. If you've been to a workshop before, you have an idea of your playing level as compared to others attending—but, if this is your first time, filling out the self-rating part of the registration can be confusing. You need a way to accurately identify your playing level.

We hope this article and chart will be helpful to novices and repeat workshopers alike, as well as to workshop organizers—as a way for a player to identify not only general playing level, but also strengths and weaknesses including specific areas for improvement. A useful feature in this rating scheme is the distinction between a player who is advanced in certain respects, but intermediate or even beginner in others.

This new rating system is a work in progress and will need fine-tuning. As players (and your teachers) use this system, we hope you will send us feedback, so that we may refine this system.

One can also use this system to track increasing ability in these areas. We have hopes that it will turn out to be a flexible tool, not only for workshop class placements, but also for daily guidance in playing our beloved instrument to the best of our abilities. (*See sidebar for more ideas for self-improvement.*)

The accompanying chart shows categories of recorder technique and musical skills, and a scoring system for different levels. It is a good idea to go through the chart with your teacher or another player, so that another person can help you make objective judgments.

Though this chart presents what we consider to be the ideal self-rating parameters, some criteria may be too detailed for workshops. It is our hope that a version of this article and chart, with input from our colleagues, will eventually be used by workshops around the continent. Our ultimate goal is to improve the quality and standard of recorder playing, to make it easier for organizers to sort workshop classes, and to demystify the self-rating process for recorder players.

## Instructions for using the chart:

The Self-Rating Chart attempts to objectify a naturally subjective task—that of rating one's technical and musical skills. Technical and musical abilities are divided into 15 areas.

Descriptions of ability level are placed at the top of the chart (novice level), in the middle of the chart (middle-intermediate) and at the bottom of the chart (pinnacle). This helps provide a smaller range within which to rate each skill. The descriptions provided at 1, between 6 and 7, and at 12 are intended to make it easier to assign a number for each category. In fact, you are rating each category on a scale of 1 (worst) to 12 (best).

The most effective way to fill out this chart is with the help of a teacher or a recorder playing friend. Think about each skill, each column, separately. Ask yourself where you fit in among the three descriptions. Go through the chart column by column, making an "x" in the box where you think your ability lies. Try to evaluate each category on its own without thinking about other skills.

Rate yourself in each column. As an example, if you (or your teacher or friend) think you are at a low level for number of recorders played (soprano only, for instance), give yourself a 2 in Recorder Sizes. Or if you play soprano well, but have only just begun alto, you might give yourself a 3 or 4.

In the Fingers column, if your fingering skills are better than the novice level description, but not quite as good as the middle-intermediate description, you can rate yourself between 1 and 6—perhaps 5. On the other hand, if your finger skills are certainly better than the middle-intermediate level, rate yourself between 7 and 12—perhaps 8.

So, while the judgments are still subjective, there are some guideposts along the way between novice and pinnacle.

Note that we have chosen to call the top level pinnacle rather than professional, because it's possible to be a professional recorder player and still have some skills that are not at pinnacle level. Keep in mind that pinnacle is the very highest

achievement of skill in each level. There are only a few people in the world who could rate themselves a 12 in every category.

Once you have made an "x" somewhere in each column, add up the numbers. For example, if you have an "x" in row 4 for Recorder Sizes and an "x" in row 10 for Fingers, add the two numbers to come up with 14, and so on for all columns.

Find your total number for the scoring chart—this is your overall recorder playing level. You can look at the whole chart, with your entries of each "x" creating a graph, to get a picture of your recorder playing abilities. In this way, a player can see on the score chart not only an overall score, but also a particular weakness or a strength in a certain area.

Logically, one might prefer the chart to be reversed, with novice at the bottom and pinnacle at the top. However, people read charts from the top down, so beginning skills are at the top of the chart.

You can cut your chart out of the magazine and rearrange it as you please. Laminate it, and mark your ratings with a dry erase marker so that you can change your ratings as you progress. Hang the laminated chart on your practice room wall, along with your musical trophies.

We will take you through two sample ratings. Here are the total scores that describe various ability levels.

#### Scoring

15 topics, 12 levels.

15 x 12 = 180 (maximum points).

Six levels: 180 divided by 6 =

30 points per level.

0 - 30 = novice

31 - 60 = lower intermediate

61 - 90 = intermediate

91 - 120 = upper intermediate

121 - 150 = advanced

151 - 180 = pinnacle

#### Case #1: A good musician with no recorder teacher

Our first imaginary student has played the recorder for 10 years. She can't take lessons because there are no teachers in her area, but she has been attending workshops for the last five years, working to improve her technique and playing level.

**Tone:** Aware that her tone needs improving, but is not quite sure in what way it needs improving. Practices blowing and breathing exercises, and can hold a steady *mezzo forte* tone for about six

seconds. Her *piano* tone is not yet steady, but she is working on it. Score: 6

**Fingers:** Knows that her hands and fingers are tight on the recorder, but has not been able to relax the "grip." So many other things claim her attention during playing that she generally forgets to think about relaxing the hands until a teacher mentions it or her wrist starts to hurt. Score: 3

**Tongue:** Aware that there are many different tonguing syllables, but has only practiced with "tu" and "du." Fast passages are choppy because she hasn't practiced the combination of these two single tonguings. Practices scales with the two different tonguings separately. Score: 5

---

### ***A useful feature in this rating scheme is the distinction between a player who is advanced in certain respects, but intermediate or even beginner in others.***

---

**Breathing:** Unaware that her breathing is often shallow when she plays. Instead of using abdominal muscles and rib cage muscles to inhale, she uses the upper chest only, except for the initial breath. When playing, can't get through whole phrases and often feels out of breath. When practicing breathing exercises, can use the abdominal and rib cage muscles; when playing music, she forgets. Score: 6

**Recorder Sizes:** Plays soprano, alto and tenor recorders. Doesn't read bass clef yet, so doesn't play bass recorder. Score: 8

**Intonation and Listening Skills:** Very keen sense of pitch, honed during years of choral singing. Can hear when she is out of tune, but can't always make the proper adjustment to correct intonation. Score: 8

**Sight Reading:** Sight reads well on pieces of easy to medium difficulty, at moderate tempi. In more difficult music, can keep her place and get back in easily. Score: 10

**Clefs:** Reads only treble clef and modern notation. Score: 3

**Rhythm:** Excellent sense of pulse, again from the choral experience and from piano lessons as a child. Reads all kinds of

rhythms well, including Renaissance rhythms. Does not have to tap her feet to keep a steady beat; internalized a sense of pulse. Score: 12

**Phrasing:** Hears phrasing well, but shallow breathing often causes her to be unsuccessful at playing the phrasing she hears. Score: 6

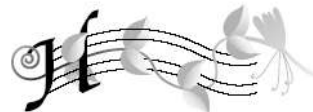
**Keeping Place:** Very good at keeping her place; but if others around her are losing theirs, has difficulty maintaining hers. When playing with other good players, she is very good at getting back in, if she does lose her place. Score: 7

**Repertoire:** Playing knowledge of repertoire limited to Renaissance ensemble pieces played with her quartet at home, and to pieces played at workshops. Enjoys Baroque music, but has no one with whom to play it; doesn't practice it, and has not taken Baroque music classes. Knows no modern repertoire and not much Medieval repertoire. Score: 6

**Knowledge of Musical Styles:** Familiarity with musical styles is greater than her repertoire because of singing and other instrumental experience, and from listening to concerts and recordings. Ability to play different national styles in different historical periods is limited or non-existent. Score: 5

**Expression:** A very expressive player, to the extent she is able to be. Technical shortcomings hamper her ability to be as expressive as she would like to be. Does not realize that a more focused regime of technique work would increase her ability to express what she is hearing in her head. Score: 6

**Total score: 92 = the low end of upper intermediate**



## *Honeysuckle Music*

*Recorders & accessories*

...  
*Music for recorders & viols*

Jean Allison Olson

1604 Portland Ave.

St. Paul, MN 55104

651.644.8545

jean@honeysucklemusic.com

### Case #2: Professional who could still improve

This person is a professional recorder player and teacher who happens to have one large flaw in her playing. (Notice that even a seasoned professional player may have specific areas in which he or she wishes to improve.)

By going through the rating categories, this player can get a better overview—and perhaps realize that her lack of tone production skills is also adversely affecting specific other areas. This may inspire her to improve the core skill, thus improving overall playing and enabling greater musical expression.

**Tone:** poor tone, lack of dynamic control, inflexible sound with an edge (all due to lack of knowledge or control of muscles). Knows that her sound is rough and that she can't get the sounds she would like. Score: 4

**Fingers:** Good co-ordination, knows all the fingerings, relatively fast fingers. Score: 11

**Tongue:** Quite fast tonguing, clean. Knows "c," "d," "r" combinations; can do compound tonguing "dg" and "did'll." Does not know "l" articulations. Score: 10

**Breathing:** Does not have a lot of air (connected with flaws in tone due to lack of muscle control), but is very aware of phrasing and own abilities and limits—so chooses breathing spots well and is able to work around problems of most long phrases; meticulous about figuring out where to breathe. Score: 9

**Recorder Sizes:** Plays all sizes of recorder, including less common ones such as voice flute, recorders in g, fourth

and sixth flutes, great bass and contra bass. Score: 12

**Intonation and Listening Skills:** Very good ear, notices other players and responds to them. Good sense of intonation, especially regarding other players (her own intonation suffers somewhat due to lack of breath control). Score: 9

**Sight Reading:** very good sight reader. Can play anything you put in front of her. Score: 12

**Clefs:** Reads all clefs, including movable C-clefs, though with most facility in F- and G-clefs and alto C-clef. Score: 11

**Rhythm:** Good pulse and subdivision sense, can figure out all sorts of rhythms without trouble. Score: 12

**Phrasing:** Very good sense of phrasing, but somewhat hampered by poor breath control. Score: 10

**Keeping Place:** Keeps place very well, rarely gets lost, and almost always able to get back in quickly. Score: 10

**Repertoire:** Knows a great many pieces of music from all periods of western music history, with main emphasis on Renaissance and Baroque periods. Score: 11

**Knowledge of Musical Styles:** Very familiar with different playing styles within Baroque and Renaissance music; also very knowledgeable about American folk music style. Score: 11

**Expression:** Very expressive, except in dynamics (again because of lack of breath control). Score: 10

#### Total Score: 142

This falls in the professional level, but points out an area for improvement that affects several of the scoring areas, lowering the overall score by a fair amount.

## HOW CAN I IMPROVE?

There are many paths to better recorder playing. If you have a professional in your area, take regular lessons. If you live in an area with more than one teacher, take trial lessons until you find the best fit for you.

If you have no teacher in your area, or if your teacher would like supplementary material for your lessons, the ARS has published a *Personal Study Program* (PSP) for guided practice. The *13 Stages*, a checklist that is part of the PSP, was mailed to all ARS members when it was issued and to new members as they have joined since then. (There is a cost of \$3 for each member replacement copy or for each non-member copy.)

The *Guidebook* and *Music Lists* for the PSP are also available for an extra charge. See the publications page in this issue of *American Recorder*, or call the ARS office, to order your copy.

To use the *ARS Personal Study Program* in *13 Stages* to improve your playing level, determine your current level using the chart here. If you score below 7 in any category, work on Stages 1-6 in the *13 Stages*. If you score below 12 but above 7, use Stages 7-13.


Use the *13 Stages* and this rating chart to improve your playing, to see what your goals are, and to see how far you have come.

Two resources to improve the basic areas of breathing, blowing, tonguing and fingering are *The Recorder Player's Companion* by Frances Blaker, and *The Modern Recorder Player*, volumes I and II, by Walter van Hauwe.

The *ARS Personal Study Program* provides specific exercises such as scales, exercises to improve sight-reading and ear-training, and suggestions for improving knowledge of musical styles in the *Guidebook*, as well as repertoire suggestions in the *Music Lists*.

Written scales are readily available in published method books or on the Internet.

As you advance, reward yourself with a new piece of music, a workshop, a new instrument!



**VON HUENE WORKSHOP, INC.**  
The Early Music Shop of New England

At the von Huene Workshop, Inc., we are dedicated to providing the best possible instruments & service at the best possible price.

**REPAIRS:** We guarantee one week turnaround on most repairs including revoicing, recorking & crack repair.

**SALES:** We stock recorders at all price levels, from high quality plastics to the finest handmade instruments and an extensive selection of music and books.

65 Boylston Street, Brookline MA 02445 USA  
tel. (617) 277-8690 fax (617) 277-7217  
<http://www.vonhuene.com> [sales@vonhuene.com](mailto:sales@vonhuene.com)