



# The Recorder Maven

## Recorder Advice From Elijah Ducon

**Dear Elijah,**

**I often hear recorder players talk about alternate fingerings. Could you please explain what they are, how to play them and why they are used?**

### **Stumped on Staten Island**

Dear Stumped,

Alternative fingerings, or non-standard fingerings, as they are called today, constitute a very important element in recorder technique. Basically, the term 'alternate' refers to substituting one group of hole-coverings for a different group which will render the same note. For example, the low 'E' on the alto recorder may be fingered: thumb and finger 1 covered, or thumb and fingers 2-3 covered. They differ slightly in color but not in pitch. Some people find one or the other more easy to finger. However, for the 'E' to 'D' trill, the first fingering is the better option, but for the middle 'F' to 'E' trill, the second is the best choice. This would be using an alternate in its simplest application.

Aside from trills and the ability to dispatch notes more quickly, non-standard fingerings are essential in achieving pitch, tone-color and dynamics throughout the range of the recorder. For example, a very quiet middle 'F' can be achieved by fingering: thumb open and left hand finger-holes 1-2-3 covered. Sometimes

alternates are used for pitch clarification in harmonic or chordal structure, especially when playing with a 'fixed' instrument like the piano. In these cases, 'F' sharp for example, would be fingered differently than 'G' flat.

Now, consider the following: .. Eve O'Kelly tells us in her wonderful treatise **The Recorder Today**, that according to German recorder scholar Herman Rechberger, it has been estimated that there are as many as 6,500 different fingering combinations available in the open register of the recorder, if three possible conformations of each finger-hole are taken into account, i.e. open, half-closed, closed. Add to this, the same number of fingerings in the other two registers and the total reaches somewhere in the region of 20,000! Many of these are probably for dynamic variation. Generally, if you use a flattened fingering and blow hard to get it in tune, you will get a good *fortissimo* sound. Whereas, if you use a sharpened fingering and blow softly, you can achieve a good *pianissimo*. Sliding fingers on and off the holes while blowing will help in getting *crescendo* and *diminuendo* effects. The American composer, Tui St. George Tucker, includes with her piece **Sonata and Romanza**, a fingering chart of quarter tones which must be mastered before attempting to play this *avant-garde* solo for alto recorder. Some of these fingerings may also be used in jazz and blues pieces to bend notes. The great Dutch recorder player/teacher Kees Otten used to demonstrate a perfect rendition of the slide chromatic scale that opens George Gershwin's **Rhapsody in Blue**, which he built on alternates and breath pressure. .. Talk about awesome!

Back to earth. Though alternate fingerings are sometimes necessary--especially for trills, standard fingerings will work quite well for most amateur players. Those interested in adding more color and dimension to their playing may want to look into some of the non-standard fingering charts and see what they have to offer. I suggest players on all levels explore alternative possibilities. It will be informative as well as fun.

*Good luck!*

***Elijah Ducon***

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