

Joy Awaits You

Here Are the Facts

By Judith Wink

The recorder has been around since the Middle Ages. You'd think something that venerable would get some respect. But no. Too many people out there think it's just a folk instrument, or a starter instrument for school kids, or a pocket-sized pipe with a shrill, obnoxious sound. Even Anthony Baines, who wrote or edited dozens of articles and books about music and instruments, dismissed the recorder as "easy to play and cheap to buy," perfect for the musician who is both lazy and tight-fisted.

Sure, in some cultures recorder-type instruments are used for folk music — Israel, for instance, which produced those abysmal Gill recorders that were made of balsa wood and left splinters in your mouth. But in Western Europe, throughout the Renaissance and Baroque periods (and that's a long time, let me tell you), the recorder was used for art music. Recorder consorts entertained Henry VIII. Bach wrote some of the solo parts in the Brandenburg concertos with recorders in mind. In the Baroque period, the recorder was one of the premiere solo instruments, right up there with the violin. There's a ton of serious music just from this era. Telemann alone will keep you busy for decades with his sonatas and duets.

Sure, the recorder is a great starter instruments for kids. You don't have to struggle to get a sound out of it, as you do with the flute; you don't have to futz with reeds, as you do with the clarinet and the saxophone and the oboe; and the finger holes on the soprano are easy for small hands to reach. But don't stop there! The instrument may be easy to learn, but you can spend a lifetime mastering it, as any professional player will tell you. And once you start exploring articulation and alternate fingerings, you will find that the recorder is as sophisticated as any orchestral instrument. It may not have the range or the dynamics, but boy, is it expressive! And no matter how good you get, there will always be another piece that's just beyond your technique. Like any other instrument worth playing, the recorder is inexhaustible.

As to the shrill and obnoxious sound people complain of, that's the soprano you're talking about, and a badly-played one at that. The soprano has a lot of big brothers, down to the F contrabass. Six feet tall, this monster has bottom notes that sound like the QEII setting sail. Now and then an instrument maker with time on his hands and trees at his disposal will make something bigger. Victor Mahillon, onetime director of the Brussels Museum of Musical Instruments, copied a Renaissance extended great bass in C. This thing is about eight feet long and virtually unplayable, but what serious musician doesn't love a challenge? A low consort — tenor, bass, great bass and contrabass — has the richness and sonority of an organ, and a lot more flexibility.

Is the recorder useless except for old music? Absolutely not. In Philadelphia jazz clubs, customers would laugh when Joel Levine got up to play his soprano recorder. They stopped laughing after the first few licks. Go on YouTube to hear a recorder quintet play "Purple Haze," the Jimi Hendrix classic. Go to Europe and hear conservatory-trained musicians play new works for the recorder. Adventurous composers have discovered that there's more to this instrument than a sweet sound and nimble articulation, and they're making the most of it. For most amateurs, though, the recorder means the Handel sonatas and Josquin motets. And that's fine. Just work on style and technique, and buy some big instruments. Joy awaits you.