

The Power of Negative Thinking

By Judith Wink

Lousy recorder players don't ask how they can improve. That's because they don't realize how lousy they are. But for the average player, the one who not only thinks he can improve but knows he should, there is hope.

The best advice I can give this person is, Don't be wrong. This isn't the same as being right. Playing the piece right is the goal. Not doing it wrong is a start. Pay heed to the words of Oliver Cromwell. No, he didn't play the recorder, he just ran a country, but he had some sound notions of how to do it. In the middle of a brawl with the impossibly rigid and dogmatic Scottish Presbyterian church, Cromwell erupted: "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken."

So if you're at bar 37 and everybody else in your consort is at bar 38, at least consider that you might be the one who's off. If you're a foot-tapper (and if you are, shame on you), have a look at the other feet in the room. If they're going down when your foot is going up, chances are you're the one who's wrong. If everyone else is playing in duple meter and you're in triple time, stop and check the time signature.

Articulation matters. A teacher with whom I play regularly will explain, sometimes at the top of her voice, that if everyone else is playing the notes short and you're not, it will sound as though no one is playing the notes short. If somebody wants you to play the notes short, just do it. This is no time to think for yourself.

Tempo matters. I know an amateur who keeps the beat by rocking back and forth. This slows her down. When I point this out, her eyebrows shoot up. "Professionals move their bodies when they perform," she insists. Yes, but they don't slow down. In a consort, think of Goldilocks when you think of the tempo: not too fast, not too slow, just right.

If you're in a group and you can hear yourself, you're playing too loud. How often have you heard this? So why are you still overblowing? Years ago I met a woman from a remote part of Long Island who had only a married couple to play with. The husband blared like a trumpeter. Julie pointed out that he was overblowing, and he said, with pleasure and pride, "That's how I like to play the recorder!" There's not much you can do with someone like this, other than encourage him to take up the trumpet, but luckily the rest of us are more open to suggestions. We are, aren't we?