

# *The Joy of Bass*

By Judith Wink

In the Seventies, when I started playing the recorder, basses were as scarce as Republicans in Manhattan. Just owning the instrument gave you cachet. Being able to play it put you on a pedestal. Music publishers in those days sometimes included in their editions an extra bass part arranged for tenor recorder, on the assumption that most groups didn't have a bass player. A friend of mine was in such a group, and when she and her cohorts decided to perform a piece arranged for SATB, they solved their instrumentation problem by leaving out the bottom line.

Nowadays it's assumed that if you're an advanced player, or even an ambitious intermediate, you will own a bass. You might also own a great bass, or even a contra. But for a long time, there was resistance. Basses cost money. Some people said they couldn't handle the stretch. Some grouched about having to lug another instrument. Some whined about learning bass clef. Some feared that if they were the only bass player in the group, they'd be stuck on the bottom line for the whole session.

In time, we all grew up. There are stages in the life of a recorder player, just as there are stages in the life of a butterfly or a forest or a star. When you're starting out, you're timid, so you hide out on second alto lines or tenor parts. As you gain confidence, you head upwards. The soprano part is where the action is, so that's where you want to be. For better or worse, some of us stay there. But just as a young adult stops drinking soda with dinner and starts drinking wine, the mature player starts to seek out bass parts.

The bass player is the grownup in the room. A sensitive listener feels this every time the lowest part returns after a few bars of rest. While it's away, the upper parts flutter shrilly like kindergarteners on speed. Then the bass comes back, stern and dignified, and order is restored. In a recorder consort, the teacher will usually tell you to tune to the bass. In a baroque ensemble, the continuo is the boss. Sure, the top lines have the flashy parts, but who sets the tempo? The sound of the instrument is reason enough to love it. It's rich and resonant, like a fine operatic baritone. Few pleasures can compare with playing a solid low F at a cadence. The instrument vibrates. Your whole being vibrates with it. For that moment, you feel on the bottom of the world.