

Recorders: Get ‘em, give ‘em, play ‘em, clean ‘em

What kind of recorder?

I prefer the Aulos 3-piece English/Baroque recorder. I personally use this recorder and have purchased them for my students to use in the classroom during my entire 35-year career.

Features of Aulos recorders:

- Clear tone through the entire range of the instrument and the notes speak well.
- Made of ABS plastic, with a lifetime warranty against breakage.
- The three-piece recorder allows the bottom joint to be adjusted to accommodate fingers of varying lengths.
- Aulos provides a case, a cleaning rod, fingering chart, and a thumb rest with their 3-piece recorders. I don't use cleaning rods in my classroom, but students use them at home. The thumb rest is a great feature and a good way to balance the recorder while anchoring the location of the right-hand thumb. (NOTE: ensure that students keep the thumb rest in the correct position at the back of the recorder between the fourth and fifth hole. Thumb rests should not be pushed up to cover the thumb hole in the back or spun around to cover holes on the front of the recorder. Thumb rests should not be pinched between the thumb and index finger. Kids find lots of ways to experiment!)

Whatever brand you prefer, I recommend that all the recorders you use are from the same manufacturer as much as possible. If you have a mix of different manufacturers, there will be slight differences in texture and tuning between recorders.

Where to purchase?

Your local music store can assist your students with recorder purchases if you provide the name of your school and what brand of recorder you prefer your students to purchase. Purchasing a discount-store recorder is not recommended. The quality is just not good enough.

My students fill out an order form and bring in their money. I place a bulk recorder order with my local music store or order online. Sometimes school discounts are available for bulk purchases.

Loaners

I purchase a few extra recorders every year to keep as music room loaners for students who are not able to purchase a recorder. For some families, a recorder purchase is a hardship. I make sure students know they do not need to pressure parents to buy a recorder and a loaner will be made available to them. If students use a loaner recorder from the music room, it is for their exclusive use until the end of the unit. I put a dab of nail polish on the end of the recorder to identify it as a school loaner. The nail polish is a permanent mark that stays on, even when washed in a dishwasher. The dot can be fairly small and doesn't draw attention to students who have a loaner instrument. A signed contract (TG p.131) helps parents know a recorder has been borrowed. The contract also creates a record for tracking recorders to be returned at the end of the term/year.

I have a bin of recorder bottoms (no mouthpiece) on hand for those who forget their recorder. Students use them to practice their fingerings along with the class and no sanitizing is required.

Storage and distribution of recorders

Recorders can be kept in the music room between classes until most students are able to play without squeaking. Students are anxious to take their recorders home, so it is motivational for students to learn to play with good tone. “Good tone to take home” is also recommended as a courtesy to families of beginner recorder players! Regardless of whether or not they are stored in the music room, recorders need to be clearly labelled (label both the recorder and the case). Our class recorders were stored in bins. To hand out recorders as efficiently as possible this was the system I used:

- Pull 2 recorders from the bin.
- Call out the labelled name of one of the recorders.
- The student you have called is given their recorder as well as a second recorder that they deliver to their classmate.

Some teachers use a numbered pegboard which could also use this distribution system.

Home practice and cleaning

Students should take their recorders home to practice. They should also regularly clean them at home so this chore doesn't use up class time.

The dishwasher is your friend!

Recorders that stay in the music room should be washed once a week. Washing them in the dishwasher works well. Students may be assigned the job of taking apart and reassembling recorders to save the teacher time.

Alto recorders

I love using alto recorders with older students. The alto has a mellow tone and can be used to add simple harmony parts to many songs. The part can be less rhythmically active with notes centered in the left hand. This works as an adaptation for students who are struggling with more difficult higher Knight level songs. The alto works particularly well for older, upper elementary boys who are starting to develop larger hands and who can easily manage the greater distance between the holes on the alto instrument.

Alto recorders sound a fifth lower than the soprano recorder if the same fingering is used on both instruments. (e.g. three fingers and the thumb on a soprano recorder will sound a “G”. Three fingers and the thumb on an alto recorder will sound a “C”.)

Alto recorder music can be written in “concert pitch” so students play a “G” fingering but hears a “C”, the same way a B^b trumpet reads the note C which will sound like a B^b. Alto recorder music can also be read as written so students learn a new set of fingerings for the notes they play. It is up to you which method to use with your students. At upper elementary level, with a program that feeds into a middle level band program, I prefer the “concert pitch” approach which they soon will be using anyway. Also, it is less complicated for the students to switch back and forth between soprano and alto recorders if both use the same fingerings. For a challenge, advanced students may be given songs that require them to learn the new fingerings.