

The Joy of Recorder Lessons

by Kathryn Canan

Wisdom, according to Socrates, is knowing what you don't know.

It's been a few years since I took any private recorder lessons. I have a few legitimate excuses—I earned a master's degree during that interval, and I've developed a busy schedule performing and giving music lessons myself, as well as tutoring Latin and writing. It's hard to fit in trips to the Bay Area and a regular practice schedule; I tend to operate in "what's the next crisis" mode. So I have been coasting along, playing a huge variety of music—everything from medieval music to Broadway shows—but unless I had tricky passages to work out I never bothered to practice alone at home. I stopped working on technique and exploring repertoire, stopped stretching my abilities. My goal became "Good Enough" rather than perfectionism.

In some ways the break from lessons was healthy; I needed to find my own voice and self-confidence as a musician. I go through periods in many endeavors when I need to stop taking in more outside information and let my own creativity take over. Teaching has also allowed me to express my own ideas.

In October, however, I committed to driving to the Bay Area four times to play in the Berkeley Recorder Orchestra. Mark Schiffer and I decided to take advantage of the opportunity to take lessons from Hanneke van Proosdij. We sit in on each other's lessons, so we both get double the value.

Hanneke evaluates where her students already are and generates a list of suggested repertoire for further study. With such a wealth of music for recorder these days, her guidance is much appreciated.

I need to be reminded of certain techniques for mastering technical difficulties: isolating intervals and figuring out which finger is the problem, making up exercises, playing passages from memory, even copying certain measures and blowing them up so they are both easier to read and isolated from the main piece. I need encouragement to try techniques like alternate fingerings for soft passages. I also enjoy guided tours of the music, with historical background and suggestions for phrasing and bringing out motifs.

As Mark says, just the chance to play with Hanneke accompanying on harpsichord is worth the price of the lesson. Since she plays both harpsichord and recorder, I hear the chord structure and also the way the bass line interacts with the treble. With her guidance, I'll finally apply all that tedious work on figured bass I did in theory classes, but this time I'll learn how the chord structure of a piece should influence my interpretation.

I'm also learning how to be a better teacher. Like some of my own students, I get performance anxiety in my lessons. In the distant past I was probably subjected too much to the fundamentalist view of music—there's one right way to play and that's the teacher's way. I appreciate the liberal mode: there are many ways to interpret music, and although some ways are clearly wrong for the period, there is still a great deal of leeway for students to develop their own artistic taste and make informed decisions. Plus, an enthusiastic "Wow, you did a lot of wonderful things just now" evaporates all that anxiety.

Finally, lessons provide much-needed accountability. I study Latin with online groups, I walk in a hiking group, and I clean the house when guests are coming. I'm hoping that regular recorder lessons will finally motivate me to practice!