

Essential tips for recorder consorts

Ensemble playing, part one



WRITTEN BY
**LOBKE
SPRENKELING**

Lobke Sprenkeling
obtained her Bache-

lor's and Master's degrees as a recorder player and theatrical performer at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague and Utrecht Conservatory, Netherlands. She continued her studies at the Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya, Spain, with a national scholarship from the Dutch *Culture Fund*. In 2016 she earned her music Ph.D. *cum laude* at the Universidad Politècnica de València. She also studied multidisciplinary theater from a musical perspective (Carlos III University, Madrid, and the Yale University Summer Program); her specific interest in the relationship between musician and body has led to her performing in and creating multidisciplinary works. She taught recorder at the pre-conservatory program (ages 8-18) of Conservatorio Profesional of València (2007-16), and has taught in Europe, Mexico and the U.S. (sessions with the recorder societies in Phoenix, AZ, and Seattle, WA, and for Amherst Early Music).

She currently teaches recorder at the Real Conservatorio Superior de Música de Madrid. In 2022 she released a CD and in 2023 taught at Lyon National Conservatory in France, in an Erasmus Program collaboration with recorder pedagogues Pierre Hamon and Sébastien Marq.

Info: <https://lobke.world>.

Whether you're just starting out or you've been playing for years, playing music together with others in a consort gives great joy and opens up almost infinite repertoire possibilities. However, sometimes it's difficult to know where to begin or how to improve as a group, especially if your group doesn't have a coach to guide you. In this article and the next one, we'll explore some key tips and insights to help you improve your ensemble playing skills.

Setting a personal foundation

Before you dive into the music, it's important to establish a solid playing foundation for yourself. Find a comfortable posture (head over heart over pelvis, and if you are sitting, try to sit towards the front on your "sit bones").

Try to relax—tense muscles can always affect your playing. Especially in a group, it's important to go with the flow. However much you've been practicing with a metronome, humans do unexpected things and make musical decisions that will probably cause the tempo to fluctuate a little bit. If you're relaxed, you will pick up on the direction set by your fellow musicians—whereas if you're tense, you're probably not going to take in whatever is happening in the moment. That can mean that you may end up having difficulties playing together.

Focus on good breath support, taking a couple of slow long breaths. An important mindset for ensemble playing is to always remember

that listening is just as important as playing. Pay attention to the other musicians around you and focus on blending your sound with theirs. In a way, it's just like a conversation!

Who starts and stops the group?

There is one general rule: in principle, the player of the first voice to play in the piece cues the entrances and the endings. This may or may not be the top line of the work being played.

From there on, however, it all depends on the type of music. For example, in homophonic music, the player of the first voice may lead it all, if necessary—although you can experiment with the group all moving together without having a clear leader.

Sometimes a different person may set the pace at the end, if several voices hold sustained notes while one voice has a moving (perhaps cadential) motive or if one part plays more moving notes during a *ritardando*. In these cases, it is vital to maintain eye contact with the person who has the moving notes. That person would also cut off the final chord.

However, in polyphonic music where each line has its own entrances, it depends much more on the individual movement of each voice.

It's best to sit together and analyze the music for such factors, so that you can decide what works best. Having a score available can help this step in the process. Sometimes, voices imitate others, or they elaborate on them. At other times, a voice comes in to say something different, like in an argument or as a surprise. Don't be afraid to take risks and try new things—that's how you'll grow as musicians and as a group.

Practicing, both together and on your own

Sitting in a (semi)circle when playing is always a good idea; you can really

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hear each other well and attune to each other. In some pieces, the bass carries the ensemble along, especially in Baroque music where the bass is really acting as the basso continuo. The bass voice is important for tuning as well, which is why I encourage the bass players to sit in the middle, with the highest voices on the outer sides of the ensemble. This was historical practice in the Renaissance—hearing the bass helps to improve the tuning of the ensemble.

Perhaps for later music you can just sit in SATB order, so that you can hear the voice nearest your own part. It's all about trying different possibilities until finding one that works best for your ensemble and the specific piece.

At home, try to practice little fragments of your own part by heart. In this way, you will get to know it much better and you will be much more confident when you play with your fellow musicians.

If it's vocal music, you have a huge advantage: you can try to sing or recite your own line. You can place your breathing marks where there are commas and periods in the text.

It's also helpful to play from the score, in order to understand where the other voices are. This allows you to start listening more and reacting more when others enter, as you play from your own part.

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ing the parts that don't work as well so that you can study them as isolated exercises. In this way, you'll make sure that the entire piece is well-rehearsed and that you don't get lost in the middle of the piece.

Listen to recordings of the piece. Record your ensemble and listen to that recording.

Finding a tempo for the piece

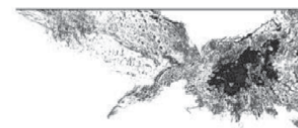
Starting a piece together at the correct tempo can be difficult, but with practice, you'll get the hang of it. Take a moment to breathe and focus before you begin, and trust that your preparation will pay off.

Remember, mistakes happen—it's all part of the learning process! Don't be too hard on yourself or your fellow musicians. Instead, focus on enjoying the music and sharing it with others.

First of all, imagine the right tempo. Feel the right tempo beforehand and try to stick to it.

Here are some tips to determine the right tempo for a piece:

1. Look at the fastest note values: they should be comfortable to play. Don't play faster at the beginning than the fastest phrase(s) you can play well!
2. If your piece is a dance form, dancers should be able to dance to that tempo. For several historical dances, you can find videos on YouTube with the actual dance steps being performed. It's true, however, that later Baroque instrumental dance forms were conceived much less as music for actual dancing.
3. The music should be performed at a tempo in which you can express the emotions of the piece.
4. How fast do the harmonies change? If they change very much and very often, probably the piece asks for a somewhat slower tempo.



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Tempo and rhythm: getting in sync

When it comes to rhythms, remember that finding the tempo that helps you all stay together is the most important goal, even if one of you feels that a tempo is not the correct one. How should you tackle a rhythmically difficult passage? The solution is to go over a problem section together.

1. Imagine your line in the piece.
2. If it helps, clap or vocalize your rhythms according to, for example, the Kodály or Takadimi systems (mentioned in my article in [AR Summer 2023](#)).
3. Play without sound, only fingering the notes without blowing.
4. Play the notes pizzicato, very short—if you're not together, it's going to be very clear.

Here is where you can use a metronome, to help you understand and maintain the right rhythms and consistent tempo. In general, use a metronome if you need to, but also trust your instincts and listen to cues from each other. It's all about finding that flow together and creating a performance that feels unified. People are not machines, which is why you shouldn't rely on a metronome.

When I work with an ensemble, we leave the metronome out of the equa-

tion until we've worked on the piece for a while—then we use the metronome to see if there are sections where we slow down or speed up. It helps us to recognize fluctuations in tempo that might be unconscious and to decide if we actually want these fluctuations or not.

As you play, read ahead at least two bars, so that you see the musical lines and are prepared for what's coming.

Don't tap with your foot—just move your toe inside your shoe if necessary. Sometimes it's even a disadvantage to tap at all, because you won't follow tempi set by the others. It may even stop you from looking farther forward in the music.

Remember to play with good relaxed posture, noting how the music flows together. In general, it may help to watch the player who starts the piece and also who indicates the ending.

Navigating rehearsals without a coach

Rehearsing without a coach can be challenging, but it's also an opportunity to grow as musicians. Create a collaborative atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable contributing ideas. Take the time to really listen to each other and work together to iron out any kinks in the music. Most important, have fun—after all, music

is meant to be enjoyed!

Prepare to rehearse by studying the piece (covering factors mentioned above), to understand it better and create a plan.

1. What time and place is the piece from? What do you know about the musical style?
2. Analyze the piece: is there imitation? Where does a motive first occur and when does it come back? Where does it change? How is the piece built up? Where is it going? Is there a climax? If you know a bit about tonality, how does that evolve? Minor tonalities tend to be more melancholic or “sad,” while major tonalities tend to be more “happy.” How do the tonalities make you feel? How do certain special harmonies make you feel? Are there specific silences in the piece? All of this is important because you're telling the music's story together.
3. Decide on the tempo.
4. Tune the chords at the beginning and at the end. (The fine points of tuning, as well as adding musical touches, will be covered in the next LEARN column.)
5. Go for it! ✨

LINKS OF INTEREST:

- Lobke Sprengeling's web site: <https://lobke.world>
- Videos for some articles in this series: www.youtube.com/americanrecordermag
- This piece is part of Sprengeling's technique series, which has progressed through individual to consort skills.
 - Part 1: “Use of Air and Breath Control: The Respiratory System” / [AR Spring 2021](#)
Use of air in everyday breathing and for good musical tone; exercises for correct breathing.
 - Part 2: “More on Breathing plus Posture and Hands” / [AR Summer 2021](#)
Additional breathing exercises, good posture, embouchure and hand position.
 - Part 3: “Articulation” / [AR Fall 2021](#) added articulation to previous skills.
 - Part 4: “A Toolbox for Coordination of Air, Fingers and Articulation” / [AR Winter 2021](#) covered all skills learned so far.
 - Part 5: “Daily study habits & how to work on a new piece of music” / [AR Spring 2022](#) applied skills in daily practice.
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 - Part 7: “How to apply articulations to music” / [AR Winter 2022](#) Basic rules, and when to break them.
 - Part 8: “How to use double tonguing and apply it to music” / [AR Spring 2023](#)
- Also: “Using a metronome” / [AR Summer 2023](#); “After your first recorder lesson or workshop” / [AR Fall 2023](#); “Diminutions” / [AR Winter 2023](#)