

## Technique Tip: How to play air and finger vibrato



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Bachelor'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 Prince Bernhard 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 de Valencia (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. Info: <https://lobke.world>.

For the recorder, a historical instrument, the general assumption since the 1970s has grown to be that vibrato is not continuously produced in the sound of our instrument—even though we do play modern repertoire as well as early music. This is a conviction based on growing historical knowledge about vibrato.

The term “vibrato,” by the way, was only used from the 19th century on. Before that, the descriptions were more vague—however, the earlier sources make it clear that vibrato was not a continuous sound quality, but rather an ornament.

As Michael Lynn pointed out in his earlier LEARN article in *AR*, there aren't any historical treatises or music books that mention air vibrato on wind instruments; the ones about vibrato all refer to finger vibrato. However, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the human voice was considered the ideal, which the instruments imitated. When thinking of wind instruments as imitating the voice, I make a case for air vibrato as well.

Frederick K. Gable, in “Some Observations concerning Baroque and Modern Vibrato,” asks: “Is it possible that in the Baroque, the natural vocal vibrato was primarily produced as an intensity or loudness vibrato, while the ornamental vibrato was a pitch vibrato?” He gives an example from the year 1695: Roger North in his autobiographical *Notes of Me*, which shows the difference between the intensity vibrato (“waived”) and the clear pitch differences in the ornamental trill-like vibrato (as in example 1). Following this historical evidence of an ornamental intensity or loudness vibrato, it would definitely make sense to use it on the recorder as well, in the form of air vibrato where we blow more, less, more, less, etc.

Air vibrato is not throat vibrato. Throat vibrato has negative quali-

ties, since it's a kind of vibrato that's actively engaging (thus tensing) your throat—hard to undo once it's a stubborn habit. For these two reasons, it's definitely a kind of vibrato you will want to get rid of—or even better, prevent. We want to be able to make a nice, controlled, open and natural tone that can sound wonderfully smooth and vibrato-less. On top of this beautiful sound, you can consciously choose to add vibrato to certain notes; either air vibrato or finger vibrato.

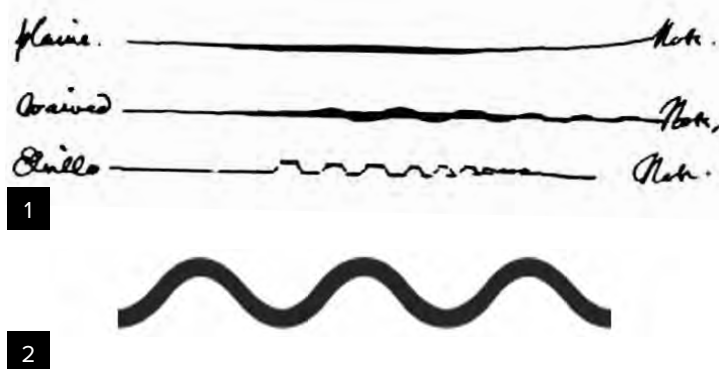
### Air vibrato

Practicing air vibrato is actually a good strategy, because it improves your control and stamina if you work on vibrato regularly.

Normally when we play a long tone, we want to make sure it's really smooth. Let's begin there: try blowing a long note and see if you can maintain a tone that's not wobbly all the way through. This is a great test to see if your breath control is good, in the sense that your core muscles are really steady. That smooth tone is your basis, to which you can add air vibrato—or not. It's the reason why I always recommend doing a warm-up with long, smooth tone, before doing anything else.

What happens when we play air vibrato? We alternate faster and slower air in the form of waves: faster, slower, faster, slower, etc.

What we have to avoid is making impulses with our air. Air vibrato is not about the alternation between pushing out air and dropping it completely—that would just be alternating between blowing and not blowing. It would not result in a gentle sound at all, nor would it be controlled. When playing air vibrato the right way, we will be blowing all the time: even when we blow slower, we will still continue the air stream. We're looking for a wavy, gentle sound between blowing faster and slower.



**1: Roger North's diagrams of vibrato.** The top line is "plaine," then a "waived" version, and finally a pitch vibrato.

**2: An example of a wave.** Alternating fast and slow air—a good way to practice, but too regular and mechanical when actually playing music.

After we understand these mechanics, we can practice air vibrato without the recorder first.

We have to keep in mind all the time that the throat must be completely relaxed and open. It should not be involved or have any tension when you produce air vibrato.

True, it's hard to directly control the throat, but here is a trick: if you notice any tension, try to yawn. Also, when inhaling through the mouth, do so with the mouth forming the shape of "ah" or "oh"—this helps open up the throat.

Let's do the following sequence of exercises without the instrument:

1. Regular: We start the exercise by blowing faster, slower, faster, slower, in a very rhythmically

regular way. Think of wavy air streams, like example 2.

2. From slow to fast: Now we start slow and gradually go faster. In this way you can practice making a really fast air vibrato.
3. From fast to slow: The other way around—we start very fast and gradually slow down.
4. Slow-fast-slow: We start slow, then go faster, and we finish slow again.
5. Fast-slow-fast: Starting fast, we slow down, but we finish fast. This requires good timing!

From here on you can work on increasing the general speed of your air vibrato. It's core muscle training—and coordination—that doesn't come in one

This piece follows Sprenkeling's series of five technique tips.

**PART 1: "Use of Air and Breath Control: The Respiratory System" / AR Spring 2021**

The first installment covered use of air in everyday breathing and in producing good musical tone, with exercises aimed at correct breathing techniques.

**PART 2: "More on Breathing plus Posture and Hands" / AR Summer 2021** added more breathing exercises, plus delved into good posture, embouchure and hand position.

**PART 3: "Articulation" / AR Fall 2021** built on previous skills to work on articulation.

**PART 4: "A Toolbox for Coordination of Air, Fingers and Articulation" / AR Winter 2021** pulled together all skills previously learned.

**PART 5: "Daily study habits & how to work on a new piece of music." / AR Spring 2022** took those skills and applied them in daily practice.

## LINKS OF INTEREST:

- Lobke Sprenkeling's web site: <https://lobke.world>
- Previous articles in her series on recorder technique: [https://americanrecorder.org/american\\_recorder\\_magazine\\_ex.php](https://americanrecorder.org/american_recorder_magazine_ex.php)
- Videos for this entire series of articles: [www.youtube.com/americanrecordermag](http://www.youtube.com/americanrecordermag)
- Both of the following academic sources likely require library access, through JSTOR or interlibrary loan.  
Gable, Frederick K., "Some Observations concerning Baroque and Modern Vibrato," *Performance Practice Review*, vol. 5, no. 1, Spring 1992.

- Millard, Peter, editor. *Notes of me: the autobiography of Roger North (1651-1734)*. University of Toronto Press, ISBN 0802044719. Or try Roger North, *Notes of Me* (1695), in Jonathan Lamb, *Recent Studies in the Restoration and Eighteenth Century: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 41, no. 3. Rice University, 2001, [www.jstor.org/stable/1556286](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1556286).
- Michael Lynn, "Introduction to flattement," Spring 2021 AR, [https://americanrecorder.org/docs/AR\\_202103Spring\\_body.pdf](https://americanrecorder.org/docs/AR_202103Spring_body.pdf).

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day, but eventually you will improve!

The next step, of course, is doing the entire sequence on the recorder. Here is where the real fun starts!

Listen very carefully to your sound while you practice this sequence. Keep relaxed and watch your good posture. If you can't go faster, don't force yourself. This comes with time.

This is a good warmup exercise before doing scales, patterns or studies and playing your repertoire! It's also a subtle way to add expression to your music.

## Flattement

The other type of vibrato is finger vibrato or "flattement." It kind of works like a trill, but on the edge of the finger hole: slow and discrete, we are caressing the border of the finger hole.

Another approach would be the flat finger technique, casting just a slight shadow over the finger hole. However, since we try to play with round fingers, let's focus on the first technique. For example, with an E on the alto recorder, we would caress the border of the second finger hole.

What happens in finger vibrato? With part of the hole covered, the average pitch between E and this half-holed note moves toward a slightly lower pitch, so we will have to blow a little bit more in order to keep the E at the right pitch level. This means that when playing flattement, we will always have to combine it with some crescendo (and decrescendo when we return to normal E at the end of the note).

Also important to note: just like a trill on a long note, flattement is very organic. It starts slowly and ends a bit faster (not too fast, though). Think of it as a gummy ball that bounces faster and faster when you drop it. In our case we should stop making the flattement before it gets too fast.

A difference between the trill and the flattement—apart from covering the hole partially—is the ending: a trill resolves on the next note, with

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the finger down; the finger in a flattement lifts up again.

Which hole do we cover for each note? Sometimes it's practical to use the next finger hole, but at other times it's more convenient to skip a hole so that the flattement happens on the hole after the next one, or even to skip two finger holes. The further away the holes, the more you can cover them. For example, for the E on the alto recorder, we could also cover holes 4 and 5 and see how that works.

Each note has its own possibilities. For example, for D, if partially covering finger hole 3 is somewhat difficult, we might use a finger and a half on finger holes 4 and 5. Then for the C, we would perhaps use the middle finger on finger hole 5. However, for the high C, we couldn't do that, because the resulting sound would be a trill! For that high C, we might use half of finger hole 4 or 5, perhaps even 6.

Flattement is the type of vibrato to use when playing a French Baroque piece. Write down where you would place your flattement, and then figure out which finger holes you would use.

In general, we want to place the flattements on long notes. In the case of several subsequent long notes, it will be especially good to add flattement on long notes that have dissonance in the harmonies with the basso continuo—these have an extra rich sound color and intensity, so the flattement enhances the expression.

As with focusing on any technical aspect (posture, sound, articulation, coordination), the fastest way to learn these techniques is by listening not only with our ears, but also with our body. Be focused and be aware of everything that happens. How does it feel? How does it sound? What is happening exactly in your body?

The more aware we are, the easier it will be for our brain to create the right connections for muscle memory. ✨



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