OPENING MEASURES

Some well-chosen words about choosing a recorder

The three main requirements of a recorder are that it must be in tune with itself, it must be responsive throughout the entire range (all the notes must be easily playable), and it must sound good. A further concern for some players is that it fit the hands well (most often a problem for players with small hands or restricted finger movement).

Before buying a recorder, you need to decide whether you want plastic or wood, and, related to this, how much money you can spend. There are at least three brands of excellent plastic recorder and many more makers of good wood recorders. Plastic recorders are far cheaper than wood recorders of comparable quality.

If you buy a top-of-the-line plastic recorder by Yamaha, Zen-on, or Aulos, for instance, you will have a very good instrument. These models are based on 18th-century recorders and therefore have a true recorder sound. They are in tune, and their Baroque-style curved and narrow windways allow for tonal control. They are not heavy, and the fingerholes are spaced naturally, so they are easy on the hands. Also, the quality of individual instruments is quite consistent. (See AR, September 1991, for a comparison.)

On the downside, they are plastic—not terribly pleasing, aesthetically. Also, since the windways are rather narrow, with surfaces that won’t absorb moisture, these recorders tend to clog up. (This is not an insurmountable problem, though. Just warm the instrument very well before playing and have a bottle of anti-condensation liquid on hand.) Finally, plain, shiny plastic recorders are slippery for those of us with moist hands. This causes players to clutch, and even slight clutching will constrict finger movement. However, these three makers offer “wood grain” versions that have just enough texture to avoid that slippery feeling—and the wood grain coatings look quite nice.

You can get wood recorders for prices comparable to the better plastic ones, but they are of lower quality. Cheap wood recorders often have wide, straight windways that give a hooty-er tone and do not allow for much variation of blowing and tone (the pitch changes too drastically). Faulty intonation is another common problem in cheap wood recorders. Also, the high notes are often difficult to play. I much prefer a recorder with a curved windway, and to get that you must buy a more expensive instrument.

Wood recorders clog less than plastic ones. Wood is more pleasuring to hold and play on than plastic. Finally, it seems (who can measure this?) that wood gives a warmer, more living tone than plastic. Wood’s only drawback is that it can crack. However, if you treat your instrument well, you should not have a problem, unless you are unlucky and get an unstable piece of wood. I have never had a recorder crack (knock on wood!).

If you decide to buy a wood recorder you will need to decide what kind of wood you want. To learn about the differences in wood types, read Philip Levin’s article “Which Wood Should I Choose” in AR, May 1986. Much of the difference between recorders of different woods seems to be in the ear of the beholder, so to speak. You must try all different types. Don’t just buy the cheapest—or the most expensive. Decide what you like. And ask other players for their opinions on types of wood.

What to listen for

When buying a wood recorder, try several of the same model. They will not be the same, and you need to find one that works well and that you like. If you are not confident of your judgment or playing skills, take your teacher or another good recorder player with you to help. No matter who helps you choose, remember that you will be playing this recorder; if you don’t like it, don’t buy it.

You should not buy a wood recorder you can’t try out in the store or on approval at home. If a dealer will not allow this, or will not agree to take back the instrument for a full refund within about 14 days if you are not satisfied, you should not buy from that dealer. For those of you who do not
When testing new wood recorders you must keep in mind that they are not used to being played. They will clog up, making it impossible for you to judge tone. Therefore, you must test recorders efficiently, never playing very long at a time on any one instrument.