

STARTING A RECORDER ENSEMBLE WITH A YEAR 7 CLASS

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BACKGROUND

Over twenty-five years ago I was faced with the rather daunting prospect of surviving a year of music teaching.

At the time, I had a reasonably challenging year 7 class. I had little sense of direction and only a few ideas on how to occupy them. By nothing more than a happy chance, I found a mixture of types of recorders hidden away in the back cupboard amongst a few odds and ends and some untuned percussion instruments. There were a couple of tenor recorders, four or five alto or treble recorders, a dozen descants, and a half a dozen of sopraninos. Almost enough to run a whole class. Why not run the year 7 class as a recorder ensemble? I could try and squeeze a little money from the school and then buy a few more recorders and some music. I was excited at the prospect.

I ventured forth into a large music shop with a few dollars and lots of enthusiasm. The first setback was the cost of the recorders, I was going to have to have more descants and sopraninos than I wanted. Still, at least I would have enough to keep a class occupied. The second setback, and the worst, was trying to find suitable music for my students. Interesting music had quite difficult parts (note-wise and timing-wise). Simple music was either infantile or boring and the rest were exercises and studies. I needed something that would attract my students without overtaxing them initially.



I felt I had no choice but to go home and try and write something for them instead.

I needed to come up with something that my students could do quickly and easily, while at the same time producing a pleasing sound that they would be proud of. I also had to cater for big differences in abilities and attitudes. The result was a little piece I wrote called 'Lament'.

THE FIRST LESSONS



In my first lesson, I simply introduced my class to the recorder family. I showed them the recorders, play them, talked about them and enthused them about the prospect of making a recorder ensemble in our class. After briefly discussing the difference between recorders, I then gave them a sheet of paper asking them to write down in order the best three recorders they would like to play, and if they were unsure, put down a descant as they were relatively easy and very important instruments (I had lots of these). I made the point anyway that very few were likely to get there first choice as we had to have a balance of different types of recorders to make the whole class ensemble sound good.

Armed with their responses and with some limited knowledge of their abilities I allocated the parts roughly as follows; *six sopraninos* to the more able students, *four trebles and tenors* to the more reluctant students in my room and *twelve descants* and *four trebles* to the rest.

The second lesson was crunch time. I decided to do only the first four bars of 'Lament'. (see musical example below). I prepared hand out sheets of this and put the same up on the chalkboard (or smart board these days). On the scores, I put the name of the note as well as the fingering. I knew this meant that they would probably not learn to read the notes, but I had to succeed in a fairly difficult situation. If I could introduce my children into the joys of music making, the finer points could come later. I needed my class to be motivated and positive to music beyond all else. These days my students all read music and I don't have to bother putting on the note names or fingerings, but I had a long way to travel first to get to that point.

Lament John Heyworth

Moderato $\text{♩} = 100$
C

G Am Gsus⁴ G

Sopranino Recorder
Soprano Recorder
Alto Recorder
Tenor Recorder

5 C G F G C G⁶ C

Sop. Rec.
S. Rec.
A. Rec.
T. Rec.

SUCCESS BREEDS SUCCESS

I started the lesson by going straight to the tenor line, I needed to get my disruptive students on side and occupied right from the start. I showed them the notes explained the fingerings and gave them their tenors. Together we struggled through with lots of encouragement, especially about the sound that I promised them would come in no time at all. Then came the critical moment. I was going to show some trust in these students (this was a first for them and for me). I gave them a handout sheet each asked them to go outside into an area I could view from the door and practice their parts while I get the others started. They were interested in what they were doing and they did not let me down.



In the same way, I worked through the trebles, sopraninos and descants until finally all students were happily practising outside. After a few minutes, I brought them in ready for our first full ensemble practice. Using my guitar to keep a quiet and a steady beat, I brought the tenor line in first. Encouraging them to play slowly and evenly we played through the four bars twice. They kept on playing unaided as I brought in the treble/alto parts and helped them through the first four bars also. The immediate harmony of the lower

and more mellow recorders noticeably gave the whole class a boost. Then came the descants, whose pedalling G offset the tenor and treble parts beautifully. And finally, floating over the top came the sopraninos. I was 'home and hosed'. The class was hooked and so was I!

We had to play the 4 bars again and again. Finally, at the end of the lesson, I asked the soprano players to stay behind. I needed to give them their music ahead of the next lesson as they would have to master their harder parts at home. (See music example above).



In a very similar fashion to the lesson before I then reinforced the first four bars before modelling the rest of the piece. I gave the students time to consolidate their parts outside and finally we all played lament together, each part making separate entries as before. Although not perfect it still sounded wonderful to us.

Other nearby classes and teachers started to make complimentary comments about our recorder playing. We were already starting to make an impact. Success breeds success, and my students came wanting more, and we all started to look forward to our music class (which was a new experience for them and for me!).

OUR FIRST ASSEMBLY ITEM

The idea to do this came from the class. I was enthusiastic, and so were they, but I felt I needed to somehow embellish the piece for it to be a bigger success. I came up with a new solo part for the sopraninos to be played after the first ending (see below). Soon we were ready for the assembly.

When we got on stage, the children were a little nervous. I was terrified. I took a deep breath before strumming the chords to the repeat line. And then the tenors started, a little shaky and unsteadily until the trebles joined in. The sound was bigger, our confidence grew, and the children and I settled down. By the time the sopraninos came in we were flying. After the first ending, the sopraninos continued with their little solo. It was a great contrast. After the solo, the whole ensemble came in together for two more repeats of the main theme. It was a stunning effect.



We played the ending to a genuine and very loud applause. The image of music was already being raised and the musical culture of our school was beginning to take shape. We were on our way!

Lament

John Heyworth

Moderato $\text{♩} = 100$
C

Sopranino Recorder *mp*

Soprano Recorder *mp*

Alto Recorder *mp*

Tenor Recorder *mp*

G Am Gsus⁴ G

5 C G F G C G⁶ C

Sop. Rec.

S. Rec.

A. Rec.

T. Rec.

9 Am G F E⁷

Sop. Rec. *mf*

S. Rec. *mf*

A. Rec. *mf*

T. Rec. *mf*

13 Am G F E⁷

Sop. Rec. *cresc.*

S. Rec. *cresc.*

A. Rec. *cresc.*

T. Rec. *cresc.*

17 Am G Am G C G C G

Sop. Rec.

S. Rec.

A. Rec.

T. Rec.

f

21 Am Gsus⁴ G C G F G

Sop. Rec.

S. Rec.

A. Rec.

T. Rec.

25 C G⁶ C **Fine**

Sop. Rec.

S. Rec.

A. Rec.

T. Rec.

Performance notes: For school ensembles, repeat first 6 bars 4 times and start with tenors only, bring in altos, descants and sopranninos on each repeat before continuing the rest of the piece as a whole ensemble.