



## RESPECTING RECORDER

*Memes from the misguided and riches couched in clear-headed thinking*

Lost in scrolling, just minding my own business in my algorithmically-curated cocoon of a social media feed, I can't help but be stirred from my screen-induced stupor by one of those cheeky memes about the recorder. Maybe you've seen them. One shows Kermit the Frog staring off into space and states the following: "I'm so glad I was taught how to play the recorder at school. It has come in really handy in life. [I've lost] count of the times I've resolved a difficult situation with a quick blast of *Three Blind Mice*." Another displays a student playing the instrument and proclaims that "just when you think parenting can't get any harder ... your kid comes home with a recorder." And then there's the one depicting a mother with a pained expression, captioned "make that recorder noise stop."

Every time I encounter one of these posts, I wince. Yes, they're just created and shared in jest. And I do have a sense of humor, despite what some may think. But here's the deal: there's often a touch of true belief behind many a widely circulating joke, and this train of thought is really a direct commentary on society's belief system regarding the recorder. Not to date myself with a referential aside, but it's truly the Rodney Dangerfield of instruments. It gets no respect.

When I think back on my own experiences with the recorder, I have only fond memories. I took it up with all of my classmates as a third grader. It helped me to develop in so many areas — music literacy, coordination and dexterity, breath control, you name it. I benefited both from what it had to offer through its own merits and as a gateway to broader musical experiences (even though I wasn't ultimately a wind player).

That's how I see it now from this distant vantage point. But what if I take a step back from that rose-colored thinking, consider those on the recorder's receiving end, and ask the hard questions: Did I create the most melodious sounds in the universe with the instrument? Probably not.

And was it always a pleasure for my music teachers or my parents to hear? Doubtful.

I unequivocally acknowledge those facts. But that's not the point here. This is about the learning process and how adults respond to it. Third graders aren't typically producing any works of Euclidean genius in their math classes; I'm not familiar with any eight-year-olds writing the next great American novel in English/ELA; there's no game-changing R&D going on in elementary science classrooms; and nobody's being drafted out of peewee P.E. to play starting forward for the Knicks. Yet, we don't meme mock anyone in those departments because we recognize that fledgling learners are simply working with age- and developmentally appropriate knowledge, skills, and tools to help them grow. Yes, I know it's slightly different because you don't hear the process in those pursuits. But learning is learning, so shouldn't the tacit parental approval for those subjects also be given for recorder?

Those thoughts, and many others related to the topic, couldn't help but swim through my mind last year when I attended my younger son's recorder concert. The students were happily engaged in performing the entire time, clearly demonstrating what they had learned as individuals and with regard to ensemble playing. Their teacher, Amy Carruthers, a highly accomplished, veteran educator, spoke eloquently to the audience about the "why" when it comes to learning recorder, and I sat there nodding in the affirmative the entire time. Connecting with her about the topic long after that event, she had this to add:

Not only do recorders provide a natural bridge between note reading and instrumental performance, but they help students understand how true music is made. Through the recorder, students learn to translate notes on the staff directly into finger placement, making abstract symbols tangible. In this way, students learn to transfer reading notes on a staff to their fin-

gers. It is a precursor for instrument study and a [necessary] tool for truly understanding how music is put together with regard to pitch relationship, musical markings, and how the solfège scale is all interconnected.

That's the truth, plain and simple. The parental populus may not like the sound of the recorder in a child's hands, and some in the field may even view the instrument as a quaint relic of the past or an outmoded entryway into music, but can you truly argue with or dismiss anything in that statement? No, absolutely not. It's airtight in its educational logic.

To further drive the point home, I'd like to share some wise ponderings from Donna Basile, who's championed the recorder through NYSSMA's Classroom Music Committee, in her role as the Co-Coordinator of the Eugene Reichenthal Recorder Festival, as an educational guru leading workshops near and far, and as a respected player and author.

In our recent correspondence, and per my request, she had plenty to say. Summarizing via run-on sentence for emphasis of breadth: Donna noted that the recorder is a vehicle to explore basic wind techniques, reinforces instruction of standard notation, builds sight-reading skills, serves as an introduction to chamber music, effectively accompanies movement, supports creative expression, delivers broad instrumental access (given its affordability and portability), connects to numerous learning standards, engages with multiple teaching/learning styles, offers a lifelong connection to music, and leads to other instrumental pursuits.

As powerfully and beautifully as that's laid out, what really struck me isn't that information but, rather, what she noted right after sharing it: "As I'm looking at this list, I realize that recorders can be used to meet all musical goals, whether they be reading, creating, listening, ear training, music history, world music and/or practice habits." Now that's something to truly respect. ||