

# Creative Challenges

for those who may find the music “too easy” or “boring”

Rachel Begley, NAVRS Music Director

*There's no such thing as easy music! If it feels easy, you're not paying attention...  
And there's no such thing as boring music: only bored (and boring) players...*

*Music is so much more than the notes on the page,  
and playing music is more than simply playing the right notes at the right time.  
Those notes and those rhythms are truly only the starting point...*

Here are some challenges, specifically selected for online playing experiences, that you can set for yourself whenever you are tempted to think or feel that the music is too easy or that it's boring. I've broken them down into sections, so if it's a mental challenge or a technical one you're after, look in those sections. Likewise, artistic challenges and those related to playing with others. Some challenges are very recorder-specific, while others apply to all instruments and voices. And some challenges are universal, across all time and all music. A challenge listed in one section might well apply to other sections too, of course, as musical skills are rarely isolated from one another.

The key to these challenges is that whatever you do won't affect anyone else, and so you are liberated from your responsibility to others -a very important part of playing together in person- and can take all sorts of chances that you wouldn't dream of inflicting on others. Experiment. Change your focus. Get creative. Work on a skill or technique you want to practice anyway. And don't be afraid of imperfection! You can't make an omelet without breaking any eggs, after all, and you can't learn without making mistakes... This is one instance in life in which risky behavior is positively encouraged!

These challenges won't all apply to every piece, but for each piece you play, you should find something here to stretch you, to help you refine your skills, to enhance your musicianship, to give you greater understanding of the music, to make you a better recorder player, to allow you to enjoy the music more than you ever thought you would.

While you may be able to handle multiple challenges simultaneously, these challenges work best if they are indeed **challenges**. Choose one that takes up ALL of the remaining space in your brain!

# Universal Challenges

- Keep an open mind!
- Imagine you are demonstrating your part for others, live or in a recording.
- Imagine you are recording your part. On video.
- Don't try - just DO!
- Use the easier pieces as opportunities to relax your mind and your body
- Use your body with true precision and purpose
- Keep movement to a minimum but don't restrict the body
- Be sure to play as many of your instruments as possible in the course of a session. They, and you, need to keep in good playing shape
- Spend a significant portion of the time on the instrument you feel least comfortable on
- Use the session to work on a specific weakness in your playing, an aspect that you feel needs practice.

## Mental Challenges

### ***Recorder-specific***

- Change parts on each play-through
- Change instruments (and between F and C fingerings) on each play-through
- Stay on the same part but change instruments (eg soprano to alto up)
- Stay on the same instrument but change parts
- Read up the octave (low soprano/tenor part on alto/bass)
- Read down the octave (high alto/bass part on soprano/tenor)
- Play tenor on a part in bass clef
- Playing with as many alternative fingerings as possible. Be sure that you are still in tune!
- If there's a part in a clef other than bass and treble, choose that one
- If you have an instrument in D or G, play it. Reading the music on those instruments doesn't get any easier if you don't practice!
- Play on a 415 instrument while transposing the part up a half-step in order to play along with a recording at 440... This is a ninja-level challenge!

### ***General***

- Get your eyes off the page more. Look up! Practice reading ahead: one measure, two measures, four measures.
- Memorize a phrase so you can play it without the music on the repeat
- Prepare fully for the session, and see how many of the teacher's comments you anticipated.
- Don't look at the music at all before the session, so that everything is sight-reading.

# Technical Challenges

- **Imagine you are being recorded on video!**

## ***The body:***

- Change your playing position (stand if you usually sit, or sit if you usually stand)
- Focus on having your skeleton (and chair, if sitting) support you, while leaving your muscles relaxed but ready for action

## ***The hands:***

- Focus on precision with the fingers and keeping the movements fast yet smooth. (The tempo of the piece does not indicate the speed of the finger movements!)
- Slur each phrase from beginning to end so you can hear problems with finger coordination (which you should then resolve, or resolve to practice)
- Use as many alternate fingerings as you can, adjusting your breath to ensure you are still in tune with the recording
- Feel the air vibrating under the fingers when playing low notes

## ***The breath:***

- Play a part using mostly the upper octave (to work on high tones)
- Play a part using mostly the lower octave (to work on low tones)
- For each phrase, use ALL your breath, no matter the length of the phrase
- Inhale deeper than you normally do, and then take only half of the breaths, without reducing the quality of your tone.

## ***The mouth***

- Experiment with incorporating different articulations as a means of expression
- Use a variety of single articulations (T D R etc), allowing each note to have a specific strength, length and ending.
- Focus on the beginning, middle or end of each note
- Practice your double-tonguing. Perhaps “digger” or “ticker” or “diddle”. Being able to double-tongue slowly as well as quickly is a sign of mastery.
- Can you play an entire piece using double tonguing of a single variety? Can you do this and also play expressively at the same time?
- In a vocal piece, explore a variety of articulations to reflect the poetic rhythms of the text
- Regardless of the piece, play every note staccato. This is an excellent way both to work on your rhythmic precision and to focus on making staccato notes as short as possible (ie all about the silence that surrounds them).

## Artistic Challenges

- Be as expressive as possible!
- In vocal music, use the text to put in appropriate breath marks
- In vocal music, use the text to give an inflexion to your notes as if they were sung
- Look for places for dynamics, and then put them in! Without going out of tune, of course...
- Add ornaments, appropriate to the style of the music
- Improvise a countermelody
- Add rubato: keep time while being out of time.
- Create a beautiful, singing line at every opportunity

## Ensemble Challenges

- While playing, focus on one (and only one) of the other parts, whether or not you have the score. The top and bottom parts are easier to hear than those in the middle. Choose the part according to the level of challenge you want.
- Having only a part to play from might feel like you are at a disadvantage, but it encourages you to use your ears a lot more than when you have a score.
- If you have only the score, maximize the opportunities offered by this “eye music”. Analyze what is going on around you, and, while playing, listen for points of interest that you have spotted in the score.
- Don’t let the score distract you from your own part, which you should play as beautifully as possible. There is no obligation to follow the score with your eyes! Use your ears instead!
- React to what you hear in the other parts
- Unlike playing with a live ensemble, a recording will never adjust its intonation to accommodate you. Use the opportunity to be personally responsible for the perfect blend of yourself and the recording.
- Matching the articulations in the recordings

## Signature Challenges

- Make a note of challenges that you come up with on your own, based on your own strengths, weaknesses, and desires as a player. And share them with others!
- Above all, have fun - and make sure it neither feels too easy nor sounds boring, no matter what material you have to work with!