

What can I do to improve my personal playing experience and increase my enjoyment of NAVRS playing meetings?

Investing in your virtual music-making

I spent the first weekend of March 2020 with members of the Rochester Recorder Society, giving an all-day workshop, teaching lessons and coaching ensembles, surrounded by delightful recorder enthusiasts from Upstate New York. A few days later, I picked my son up from college just as campus shut down. And less than a week after that, I entered the brave new world of Zoom and online recorder teaching.

As both a recorder teacher and Music Director of an ARS chapter, I felt an imperative to learn as much as I could about what I could do to continue to support my students and chapter members during those uncertain times. I attended webinars, information sessions, classes. I watched technological videos and read countless articles, blogs, and social media posts. I consulted with colleagues on a regular basis. And, bit by bit, I slowly pieced together the various technological components and other resources we would need to sustain our musical lives online. Most of that is for another day. But here I wanted to share with you what I feel is the most important investment I made and that YOU can make in order to enhance your experience in online playing meetings.

The most obvious place to start is the sound that we, the listeners, experience: whether it is taking part in a class or having a lesson, whether it is listening to an audio recording or watching a YouTube video, the better the sound, the more rewarding it is.

To get a good idea of relative sound quality, use one or more of these tracks, and compare what you hear to what you would want to hear from the same players in a live, in-person performance:

- Beethoven Symphony No.5, 1st Movement (for familiarity)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jv2WJMVpQi8>
- Trombetti: Diligam te Domine (for early music, with a rich low recorder sound)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x52-VKWI9hg&t=38s>
- For a more “contemporary” recorder sound:
[youtube.com/watch?v=NAu-O-0NUuc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAu-O-0NUuc)

Lesson 1: Convenience means sacrificing quality

Let's start by looking at some common choices in terms of equipment, and at the low end of the scale we find the following:

1. Mobile phone, using its built-in speaker
2. Tablet, using its built-in speaker
3. Laptop, using its built-in speaker

You can't beat these for convenience: no extra gear required!

Remember back in the “old days”, when folks talked about playing music on their “hifi system”? Hifi referred to “high fidelity”, that is, the sound you heard had a high degree of faithfulness to the recording, often thanks to speakers that could, and often did, also function as pieces of furniture. The speakers in today’s devices wouldn’t function as furniture in even the tiniest of dolls houses, nor are they designated “hifi”, and that’s for the simple reason that they are not trying for faithful reproductions of recorded sound. I call them “low-fi”, and while I wouldn’t be without their easy convenience, they ARE limited. We lose a lot of the low frequencies, so you may not hear those notes at all or they are distorted. We also lose high frequencies, and where this shows most clearly is in a thin sound, lacking in rich texture. “Tinny” is a good way to describe it. The volume is also limited, and the sound is in mono (from one direction only), not stereo. While it’s perfectly adequate for conversations, I don’t think many of us would enjoy listening to a classical music concert through this medium, if we had the choice. So, Lesson 1 really means: Avoid the use of internal speakers.

Lesson 2: External speakers are better than internal ones

After lesson 1, it is unsurprising to learn that external speakers will almost always be an improvement, often drastically so. Here we have essentially three options.

- The first is to use wired speakers. The ones I use are more than a decade old, and were chosen largely because they have both a tiny “footprint” on the shelf over my desk and yet produce an impressive sound. (See end of article for the ones I have.) The big plus point here is that they are STEREO speakers, so you can hear the spatial separation of the sounds (eg. soprano recorder to the left, bass recorder to the right), which is obviously much more faithful to the recording, much more like things are when they are live.
- The second option is a bluetooth speaker, which gains in convenience (you can put them anywhere, as long as they have a wifi connection to your device), but loses out on the stereo aspect, and in general the sound still lacks some depth.
- The third option is one that most people have but haven’t considered because it’s just plain awkward to use for a playing meeting: your car stereo! Often, this is by far and away the best sound system of the household, with excellent stereo effects, richness and depth to the sound, and more... If you can somehow sit with the right posture for playing, while simultaneously playing from music and also being able to see the session on a screen, I say “GO FOR IT!”

Lesson 3: Headphones can be a total game-changer

The answer to “What else is there” is that headphones (and ear-buds) solve a number of issues.

- **Sound-quality:** You can get pretty amazing sound for under \$100 (though avoid spending less than \$50). It will be a joy to listen to and/or play along with recordings that sound this good.

- **Stereo:** You can hear spatial separation when listening to stereo tracks. It's amazing to be able to hear, for example, where the tenor player is sitting, or to identify the challenging bass part that you are playing being mostly in your left ear rather than the right.
- **Mobility:** You can be more mobile, so you can choose to stand or sit, or to reposition yourself as necessary within the room
- **Surround Sound:** You can turn up the volume and surround yourself with sound without disturbing others. I often tell players to put the music up as loud as you can stand it! That encourages both easier listening and better blowing, which in turn encourages better intonation and a better ensemble playing experience.

My advice with headphones is three-fold:

1. Get wired headphones rather than bluetooth. Bluetooth not only requires power (so you have to remember to charge them), but also can sometimes cut out (at the least convenient time). I also suspect that Bluetooth compresses the sound (losing a little off both the top and bottom frequencies). I have two sets of wired headphones, and each comes with a 10 foot cable, allowing for flexibility of positioning. How many want to be that far from the screen in the first place?
2. Use headphones rather than earbuds. Most earbuds now work using bluetooth (for limitations see above). Those that don't generally lack the desired sound quality. In addition, earbuds by design block the ear canal, making it hard to hear yourself playing. And this IS all about you playing, right?
3. Get OPEN-BACK (as opposed to closed-back) headphones. If it doesn't say "open-back", it isn't! Closed-back is the standard form of headphones, designed to keep external sounds out. Open-back allows you to not only hear the recording in your ears, but also allows you to hear the sound of the room you are in, including whatever you say, sing or play. This means you can really hear yourself playing along with the recording (rather than mostly yourself or mostly the recording), and consequently it's much closer to the experience of playing with other people in the same room. In comparison, closed-back muffles your own sound so you can't enjoy the sensation of playing with others, and you don't have a sense of what your own sound is.

So what are my recommendations?

This is NOT a place for a balanced review of all the possibilities out there, or even of a few of them, but simply to let you know what I have found to be a good investment (a sound investment, you might say!) for online music-making experiences. Audio equipment, like many things, has something for every budget, but here I have, with one exception, kept things modest.

So as not to favor particular retailers, I have given the manufacturer's website. You can generally find these items at a lower price with a minimal amount of looking around online.

External computer speakers

Mine are from the original Bose Companion Series. The newest version is:

https://www.bose.com/en_us/products/speakers/computer_speakers/companion-2-series-iii-multimedia-speaker-system.html

\$150 or less

Bluetooth speaker

Here's the newest version of an older one we use at home:

https://www.bose.com/en_us/products/speakers/portable_speakers/soundlink_mini_ii_special.html#v=soundlink_mini_ii_special_triple_black

\$200 or less

Open-back Headphones

1. These are the ones used by the majority of my students, and the ones I started out with. The sound quality is extraordinary for the price, as is the comfort level. I tried a number of others which were more expensive but sounded worse, sometimes a lot worse, or that simply hurt my head as I wore them.
 - a. https://www.usa.philips.com/c-p/SHP9500S_27/hifi-stereo-headphones
 - b. They are still available from multiple online retailers.
 - c. \$100 or less
2. I only upgraded to these when I found I was wearing headphones for 4 or more hours a day, which was causing headaches and over-heated ears. These are both feather-weight and supremely comfortable, and I found them to be worth the hefty price tag. The sound quality is, needless to say, excellent.
 - a. <https://www.audio-technica.com/en-us/ath-r70x>
 - b. \$350

You will notice that the Philips Open-Back Headphones I recommend are actually the cheapest item here, and while you can spend a lot more, and I mean a heck of a lot more, there's really no need, unless you plan on wearing them for hours and hours a day. So go on: treat yourself! Or add them to your holiday wish list! You're investing in yourself, in your playing, and especially in your increased enjoyment of NAVRS!