

Helpful Hints for Inexperienced or Insecure Players (aka timid tooters / perturbed pipers)

So you're interested in attending a NAVRS playing meeting - maybe you've even signed up! And you're not sure you are up for the task. What now?

The first thing to realize is that every single player at the meeting, the leader included, has been in the position you are in. It may have been last week, or it may have been decades ago, but everyone understands what it feels like to (choose one or more):

1. Play only one size of recorder
2. Find the rhythms challenging
3. Find the music too fast
4. Get lost, repeatedly
5. Forget the fingering, or switch fingerings by mistake
6. Not hear something in the music
7. Feel disheartened
8. Feel that you don't belong, and so on.

Don't let these concerns (and/or others) keep you from getting a lot out of the playing sessions, even when all you feel is your limitations. The trick is to be prepared, to have a strategy, and to build on the experience!

BEFOREHAND

1. PRINT OUT THE MUSIC

To prepare for the meeting, print out the music. This will allow you to write on it! (Though some use a second screen to play from, they are generally experienced players or those who are content with their current skill level.)

People write all sorts of things on their music:

- Breath marks (this is the MOST useful thing)
- Where the beats are and how to count certain rhythms, including rests
- Making sure the "road-map" is clear (where the repeats are, where they go back to etc)
- Highlighting the part you intend to play (if playing from a score)
- The tricky passages that you want to practice (or leave out during the session)
- Articulations and other expression marks
- The fingering for the first note, so you get off to a good start. The same thing for when you have rests and need to ensure that your re-entry note is correct
- Some even write note-names (but I don't recommend that). Write the fingerings for critical notes (as above), and let your fingers do the walking,

And so on.

Printing also allows you to more easily compare parts when trying to choose which one(s) to prepare (see below). You might even print out a practice copy that you mark up as you prepare for the session, then have a clean(er) copy for the playing meeting itself.

And of course printing allows you to write down all the helpful information that the playing meeting leader is giving, for you to write in reminders for yourself (as above), as well as for you to make a note of what you might want to work on again later with the recording (more on that later).

2. CHOOSE A PART (or PARTS)

In virtual playing sessions, we have the unique opportunity of being able to select which part or parts we want to play, without regard for anyone else! Our choices don't affect the other players, just ourselves.

If you are feeling insecure, it's a good idea to choose ahead of time which part or parts you want to play in a session, so you are prepared for that. In general, I advise players to prepare two parts (if possible) for each piece, so that they can switch to the other one as necessary or desired.

On occasion, teachers may select a piece or give a task to everyone which will require you to play on an instrument you haven't got to hand or don't feel comfortable on. Embrace the challenge, or just sit back and listen!

There are a number of factors to consider when choosing which parts to play.

Instrument Size

- If you play one size of recorder, choose that!
 - If that recorder is soprano but the soprano part is hard (or there is no soprano part), play the tenor part. Only you will know! It may sound weird at times with the recording, but you will feel more comfortable playing an easier part, and you are getting the playing experience regardless.
 - If that recorder is alto, but the alto part is hard (or there is no alto part), play the tenor part and miss out (or hum or sing!) the notes that go below the staff.
 - If that recorder is tenor, but the tenor part is hard (or there is no tenor part), play the alto part and miss out the high notes you don't know the fingerings for.
 - If that recorder is bass, you are a rare bird! Time to learn a new instrument!
- If you play more than one size of recorder but feel unsure about switching between fingerings, stay on a single instrument or set of fingerings for the whole session.
- Some people use playing meetings to play as many different recorders as possible - for the variety of sound, musical role, technical demands, reading challenges - while others choose to be more relaxed or to focus on finessing things by limiting their instrument selection. Only you will know what is right for you for any particular session.

Clefs

Most of the time we are playing in treble clef, with notes just as we learned them from method books and fingering charts. There can be exceptions though, so it's good to be ready for these.

- Alto players are sometimes asked to play “alto up”. What this means is that you read the note on the page, but play the same-named note an octave higher. This most often happens in arrangements of vocal music, and is definitely an important skill to develop.
- Bass players generally play from bass clef, but are occasionally asked to play from treble clef.
- And very occasionally you will encounter C clefs (like alto or viola clef, or tenor clef), especially if you are playing from viol consort music. This is definitely challenging and requires practice, but outside of this repertoire, you won't encounter them very often, especially nowadays.

Complexity

For many players, especially those who play two or more sizes of recorder, this is the defining characteristic for part selection. A lot of the time people look at how challenging the part is technically (eg. do I feel comfortable playing those notes, is this going to be too fast for me), and this is certainly a consideration. You should also think about the rhythms of a particular part. It's almost always a good idea to choose parts with larger note values. And just because a part has lots of rests doesn't mean it will be easier!

Musical Role

This applies less to inexperienced players, but is valid nonetheless. Some people have a natural leaning towards lower instruments, some like to play the “diva” in virtuosic parts, others just love the sound and feel of (say) the tenor recorder. You may enjoy being part of the inner texture, or playing a slow-moving theme while others dance around your part, or you may simply want to play the kinds of parts that you aren't able to when you play in person. Seize the opportunity to feed your passion!

3. PLAYING AND PRACTICING

Most people will play through the music ahead of time. This is a good idea, as you will know when you need to have your wits about you (notes, rhythms etc). It's also good to know what your own part sounds like, because often when you are playing along with the recording it can be a bit overwhelming.

Some people will practice the music ahead of time. Practicing is more than playing it through. Rather, it is isolating sections which are challenging and working on those in more detail. Sometimes we need to do this for technical reasons, sometimes for establishing the correct rhythms, and sometimes to build confidence. A little focused practice goes a long way!

The **MOST** important skill to work on ahead of time, however, is being able to leave things out! One of the particular challenges of playing along with recordings - as opposed to playing with live and responsive humans - is that the recordings do not slow down and prevent you from being left behind, or speed up when you get over-enthusiastic, or allow you a do-over when you miss an entrance, or, in fact, accommodate you in any way. **WE** have to learn how to accommodate the recording, and that means keeping up with it, no matter what.

- Sometimes that will mean simplifying your part, say by playing only the first note of every measure, or the first of every group of 16th-notes, and so on.
- Sometimes that will mean counting and listening through a tricky section, ready to come back in when the going is easier.

Figuring out your strategy will make things so much more fun during the session.

And then once you have your strategy, you need to practice it! This is where your metronome (either the physical one or the one on your phone/tablet/computer) comes into its own. Be sure that your metronome is as loud as you can stand (my own - Wittner MT50 - is obnoxiously, almost painfully loud), and make sure that you listen to it! It's easy to ignore it when your brain and Set the metronome for the tempo that the piece is set at (most teachers will indicate this, either on the music or in their notes), and then stick to it like glue. Leave out notes, leave out sections, leave out the whole thing and just scat or count your way through - it's all good, as long as you stick in time with the metronome! If you can stick with the metronome, you can certainly stick with a recording: it's even easier when there are notes to hold on to!

DURING THE PLAYING MEETING

The number one rule about playing meetings is that **it's OK to simply listen**. In fact, sometimes it's the very best thing you can do! You will learn a lot from the teacher: historical background, suggestions for personal rehearsal and practice, details of musical style, technical tips, practical advice, explanations, jokes and more. You will get to hear some great music, and that is music that you will be able to play along with, if not now, then hopefully in the near future. And ideally you will be inspired too. Keep listening!

And it's OK to listen when the piece is played the first time while you are following along with the music in front of you (with your eyes and ears, but no instrument) , then joining with the playing in subsequent renditions. You'll have more of an idea of what you are a part of. Keep listening!

And it's OK to listen when you are simply too tired to keep playing. It is amazing how exhausting playing with others can be, especially when it's not something you do very often. Keep your eyes on the music, move your fingers on the instrument if you like, and keep listening!

AFTER THE PLAYING MEETING

1. USE THE ON-DEMAND RECORDING

One spectacularly useful thing about NAVRS playing meetings is that they are recorded, and all those who signed up for the meeting can access them on-demand for 10 days after the meeting (and if you ask nicely, we might allow them up for even longer). Our main goal in providing these recordings is to allow those who miss the playing meetings (either by design or misfortune) to watch and participate at a later time. However, there is another advantage, and that is the opportunity to participate in the session multiple times, to use repeated participation as a means of practice.

Here are some ways you might use the recordings of the playing meetings:

- To listen to recordings of each piece without playing along
- To revisit favorite pieces to enjoy playing them again
- To play different instruments from the ones you chose in the live meeting
- To revisit challenging pieces, adding in more of the notes you left out
- To listen again to the information and guidance from the teacher
- To practice the skill of playing along with recordings
- To practice listening and following the music with your eyes and ears.

2. KEEP A JOURNAL

No, not one exploring the inner workings of your psyche! No, this should be a journal of your experiences with the music at playing meetings, a practice journal of sorts. You might want to keep it with the music from the session. Things to note might include:

- Which pieces were played
- Which instruments you played and on which piece
- How you prepared
- Which pieces you enjoyed, and why
- Which pieces you struggled with, and why
- Technical tips
- Musical suggestions
- Other useful information
- General impressions of the meeting and leader
- How you felt about the experience: preparing, during, afterward

The best journals are not only a record of the event and your experience of it, but also capture your own development as a player. Over time, you'll see where some things became less of a struggle, where others became second nature; you'll see when you branched out to other instruments/types of parts, or that time when you took a chance and it was a success (or wasn't). It's often only by looking back that we appreciate the challenges we've met, how far we have come, where we are now, and how truly wonderful the journey has been.

Happy music-making!
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