

Another Way to Play:

Teaching Instrumental Music to Students with Upper Limb Differences

By Valerie Peters, Andover MA

Every year, between 1 and 6 in 10,000 children in the United States is born with an upper limb anomaly.¹ During childhood, many more lose hands and arms to accidents or disease. These children grow up and enter our classrooms, and as inclusive, innovative Orff-Schulwerk teachers, it is our job to provide them with the most diverse and successful instrumental music experience possible.

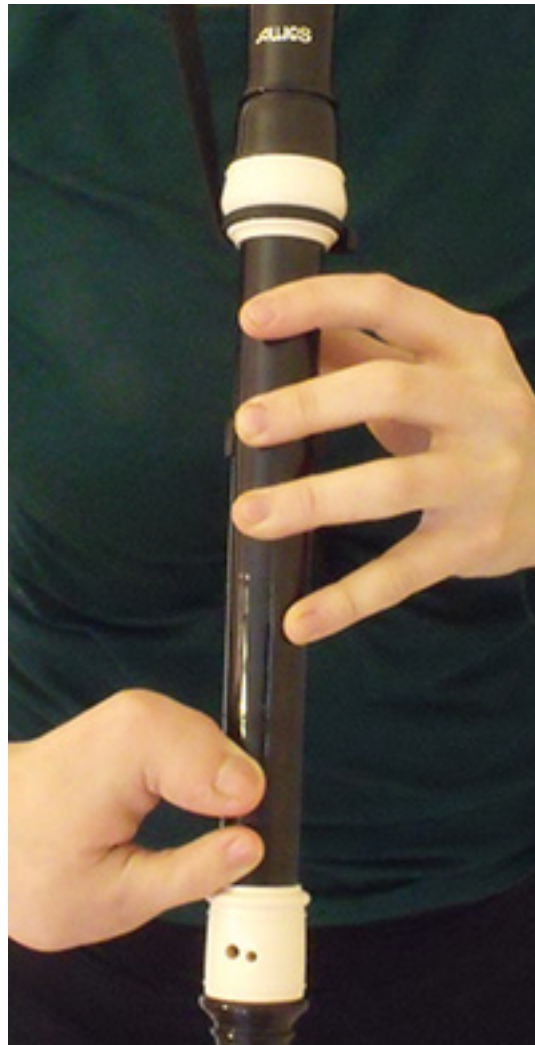
Upper limb differences vary widely in severity. Perhaps you have a student with amniotic band syndrome - whose fingers are partially formed and/or fused - or a student with arthrogyriposis - whose arms are locked with a limited range of movement - or a student missing one or both hands or arms. No matter the difference, there is one constant: your student is a child. Musical instruments are just as magical and appealing to the child with a limb difference as they are for any other child. In my twenty-five years of experience with the Helping Hands Foundation, a support group for families of children with upper limb differences, I have not once encountered a child who did not want to play instruments (or sports and games) just like other children. Furthermore, I find that an overwhelming majority of these children have positive attitudes as well as the drive and creativity to surmount many challenges. Often times it is the adults, the parents and teachers, who have doubts and worries.

How, then, can you best support your student with a limb difference in the Orff classroom? First, you must have an open mind and be willing to experiment. Abandon any notions you have of the "correct" technique for playing an instrument; the correct technique is the way that allows the player to produce the best sound in the most facile way possible. Think backwards and imagine the ideal end result first. As you brainstorm solutions with your student, ask her what she can do rather than tell her what she *cannot* do. There is no better way to sense your student's capabilities than to emulate what she would do with her own body. Do this in front of your student. If nothing else, she will appreciate your empathy as you imagine what it would be like to have a limb difference!

As you contemplate instrument adaptations, reflect on how a musician typically holds a particular instrument. Can the effort it takes to hold the instrument be lessened? The less a musician's body is used to hold the instrument, the more her body is available to *play* the instrument, and it is crucial for players with limb differences to be able to use the whole body. Would an instrument stand or brace help your student? Look around your classroom for inspiration. How else could you use a cymbal stand, a recorder thumb rest, a triangle clip, or a piece of tubing for a barred instrument? If your student can only hold one finger cymbal, what pegs and clips do you have that could support the other one? Self-adhering elastic bandage material (found at your local pharmacy for about \$5) can be used to wrap mallets directly to a child's arm or partial hand, or it can be wrapped around a mallet to make it thicker and easier to grasp. This material is reusable, adjustable, and affordable.



Mallet Adaptation



Author Playing Adapted Alto Recorder

Playing the recorder tends to be one of the primary concerns of teachers and students. Although it may be tempting to have your student play a barred instrument instead, I strongly encourage you to search for the best recorder solution possible so as not to exclude the student and to give her experience playing a wind instrument. There are several recorders on the market which are designed for players with fewer than ten usable digits, and beyond that, key work and brace supports allow for more individualized solutions. Before purchasing a model, think carefully about your student's difference. How many usable digits does she have? (If your student has more than five fingers, consider an option that involves all of her fingers rather than a one-handed model.) How many digits are opposable? What is the natural orientation of the fingers? Can they move with enough strength and accuracy to cover an open hole without the aid of keys? If your student is missing a hand, how long is her arm and can it be used for anything? Again, abandon traditional concepts of technique. The right hand can play on top (and, for once, this is permissible!). The pinky of the top hand can cover the fourth hole, provided that the hand is big enough. Keys can be added to an instrument, and a finger or thumb can operate multiple keys. For instance, if the pinky finger operates keys on the fourth and fifth holes, the top hand can cover the thumb hole and the top five holes. Holes can be plugged and drilled in different locations. To make the recorder easier to hold, you can construct a support brace out of a plastic thumb rest and a wooden dowel. You can use parachute cord and cord stoppers to create an adjustable neck-strap, which, in combination with a brace, makes it possible to hold the recorder with only one thumb on the back of the instrument. (Detailed directions for making this brace can be found on the author's [website](#).)



Neck-strap



Brace



Strap + Brace

You may wish to contact your local chapter of the American Recorder Society, as you may find a member who can customize an instrument, or - at the very least - you will have a network of players with whom you can share ideas.



Adapted Recorder

When teaching children with limb differences, use the same standard of teaching as you would for your other students. Demand a high level of musicality and do not hesitate to address technical shortcomings. Your student deserves both encouragement and guidance to improve. Most important, do not assume that your work is finished once you have created an instrument adaptation. Follow through with your student to make sure that it allows her to play well, and if not, search for improvements. For more information about models of recorders, adaptive products, tips for playing instruments adaptively, musicians with limb differences, support groups, and more, visit my [website](http://www.amputee-coalition.org/inmotion/jan_feb_06/congenital_limb_part1.html).

1 http://www.amputee-coalition.org/inmotion/jan_feb_06/congenital_limb_part1.html