

TEMPO  
IN RECORDER  
CONSORT MUSIC

explored for  
The Society of Recorder Players

by

PAUL CLARK



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# How does it go?

## Preliminaries

At some time or other, most players have difficulty in finding the right tempo for a piece they want to play. This little monograph aims to help such players find a solution to their problem.

To begin with, these remarks are directed to consort players rather than soloists, duettists or trio sonata players, who may get a look in later on.

When this series of booklets was first mooted, the proposed title of the present offering was - 'How fast does it go?'

A typical question for Westerners obsessed with getting ahead, in fact with all sorts of getting. An Easterner, more attuned to meditation, contemplation, even resignation you might say, might ask instead, How SLOW does it go?

## Chiefs and Indians

Fast or slow, it depends first of all on who you are playing for. Is your consort playing solely for the pleasure of the participants, or do you intend to make public presentation of music? If the former, you may not worry overmuch about attaining the right tempi, on the theory that if a job is worth doing, as G.K. Chesterton observed, it is worth doing badly! People can quite happily play a piece wrongly for years, without realising. Does it matter? Not in a 'fun' piece like Matthias Friederich's Happy Birthday Variations for recorder trio (Moeck, Zfs 599/600). Presumably the arranger, composer and publisher of this piece all thought strict tempo indications unnecessary or clear advice would have been given. Unless they thought it self evident. (Dance forms, folk tunes, chorales, hymn tunes and such like may be thought so well known as not to need their tempo quantifying). But if you mean to inflict yourselves on

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others, on a listening public, you must do it right, if only in the hope of being asked again. Do you aim to amuse, divert and entertain your audience (and was that the original composer's intention), or do you seek to elevate and inspire them? Upon your answers to these questions will depend, to some extent, your choice of tempo.

Although but a single aspect among many in the performance of concerted music, and one that must be considered in conjunction with all the others if one is to produce a finished performance, rhythm is the most primitive and the most basic element of the consort music, and the most fundamental aspect of rhythm is tempo. Finding the appropriate tempo for a piece is of paramount importance.

A lot of recorder music is in playing-score, where every player gets the whole publication, pretty covers, editorial preface and advertisements included, but much music is also issued as score and parts, in which case any critical notes, performance suggestions, analyses and so forth, are confined to the score, where they are quite to remain unread! Walter Bergmann, of blessed memory, once pointed to the preface of a new publication and remarked 'very necessary to be read'. My family also once received an assemble-it-yourself toy made in Australia: on the top of all the packaging inside the box was a scruffy sheet of folded paper, bearing a red-ink scrawl which commanded: READ THE \* \* \* \* \* INSTRUCTIONS!

Since wisdom dispensed in prefaces may often have applications beyond the immediate sphere of the publication, I quote a few snippets here:

□ 'Tempi should not be too fast, assuming that these gagliarde, like many of their time, are independent instrumental pieces rather than functional dance music' (Bernard Thomas, 2 Gagliarde for 4 instruments, by Giovanni Francesco Anerlo, LPM EML 116).

□ 'In performance a steady tempo of about minim = 80-90 is suggested. Performers who find this much too slow would be better advised to make use of suitable ornamentation (especially at

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cadences) rather than take the piece at a much faster tempo' (Bernard Thomas, Canzon prima, by Giovanni Gabrielli, LPM VM1).

□ 'Tempo and phrasing should be as loose and light as possible' (Hans Ulrich Staeps, Suite 'The Faery Queen', by Henry Purcell, Universal, UE 12604).

□ 'Metronome marks, phrasing, ornamentation and dynamics have been added by the editor as they have emerged in the course of performance. They are in accordance with the principles of interpretation of the time as revealed by documentary evidence' (Carl Dolmetsch, Sonata for five recorders - La Scalabrina, by Giovanni Battista Vitali, Universal, UE 14033).

□ 'Tempi and dynamics have been deliberately omitted from the score, individual performance practice being dependent on the varying technical standards and the acoustic surroundings available. A clue to the speed of an instrumental performance of this music has however been given through the use of the time signature, which suggests the (ultimate) pulse-beat for each piece (2/2)' (Aaron Williams, Elizabethan Consorts, Ricordi, LD 666).

□ If you have a domineering leader, then make sure he reads the preface thoroughly! If you are a democratic bunch, pass the score round each time you practice, so that everybody in turn can take it home and study the editorial and critical matter and be aware of it in their playing. A lot of the information given below may already be sitting in your musical storage, waiting to be accessed. Whether you are an autocratic consort or a consensus ensemble, guidance about tempi is vital. Where should it be sought? First of all, in the nature of the music itself.

### **Characteristics of the Music**

Some of the music we play is based on tunes that everybody knows so well that the question of tempo hardly arises. At least, one would think so. I couldn't believe, looking at my score of Walter Bergmann's arrangement of Greensleeves (Schott Ensemble 6), that

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I had ever condoned playing it at dotted crotchet = 44, yet that was what I had pencilled on the copy. When a consort piece is based on a folk song, should the song melody proceed at the tempo it would normally be sung (if there is such a thing), obliging the other parts to fall in with the tempo? Here a knowledge of the folk song itself is beneficial. English players would probably know Polly Oliver (see Stanley Taylor's *Fantasias for quartet*, Schott Ens. 7), *I will give my love an apple* (Stanley Taylor's *Fantasia*, Curwen 90407) and the Cuckoo she's a pretty bird (the second movement of Dom Gregory Murray's *Petite suite for recorder quartet*, Schott, Ens. 26). They might not know 'Es taget vor dem Walde' (Variations for two trebles and tenor by Ekkehart Nickel in Moeck Zfs 535) or 't'Andernaken' (Anonymous setting for ATTBB in LPM RB1). Bach's 'Air on a G string' is another piece so well known that tempo advice would seem unnecessary. Alex Ayre's edition of it for I.M.P. is unusual in that he has DOUBLED (without comment) the original note-values to make it more amenable to present day amateur players. To have commented might have been only to confuse the issue, but familiarity with the Air must surely prevent anyone playing it unworthily! The score of Henry Mancini's 'On the trail of the Pink Panther' (Moeck 2805) gives no clue to the loping gait of that curious creature, yet everybody must know how he goes!

If it is dance music (historical or otherwise), find opportunities of seeing the dance, or of playing in a band for actual dancing, or best of all, learn to dance it yourself. (Advice easily given, by one who cannot tango, waltz, jig or jive!). I once had to judge a festival in which six players in a class of about twenty each came forward to play an item from O'Neill's *Music of Ireland*, every player with impeccable tone, perfectly clean and clear note production and no wrong notes, but no rhythm either: all the notes the same length in an unchanging slow tempo. How did anybody get such sure technique from young players while depriving them of all the rhythmical joy of the jig? Remember that as time passes, musical forms that first live on the dance floor, eventually become stylised music for the salon or the concert hall and this transition often involves a change of the tempo.

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Similarly if it is vocal music, learn to sing it. In times gone by, singing was frequently regarded as the foundation of all music, and a necessary accomplishment for anybody who aspired to play an instrument. In madrigals and motets, so often transcribed for recorders, the mood of the text can have an important bearing on the tempo of the setting. Enlightened editors and publishers tend to supply the texts of vocal pieces that have been adapted for instrumental playing, and also give translations where the texts are foreign. Make the most of such help!

Quite a lot of keyboard music has been arranged for recorders. If an arrangement gives no clue to the tempo of the piece you may have to have recourse to the original or to a scholarly edition of the original, or to a masterly performance, to see if help is available there.

Hear the best performers at concerts, on radio and television and on disc and tape, play the music you want to play. They may give you valuable pointers in the matter of tempi as in many other respects. Indeed, it is often the hearing of a stirring performance by star players that will commend a piece to a humbler consort. Playing one of my old recorder records I found I couldn't stand the pace: a pavan with romantically swerving tempo, excessive ornamentation and unnerving vibrato. Fashions change! Decide whether you want to be in the fashion or to abide by your convictions, if they are unfashionable.

### **The dots**

Eventually extraneous considerations such as these must give place to the actual dots, to the notation of the music and it is here that we come to the first hurdle to be surmounted:

Much of the music we play is 'early music' and has had to be rendered from ancient forms of notation into something useably modern. This often involves a reduction of time-values by one half or even by one quarter. Conscientious editors tell you where they have done this: some remain silent and leave you wondering. The

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Hebron Fantasias à 3 (SRP 13) have time signatures of 2/2 and the information that note-values have been halved. The first notes, now minims, were originally semibreves and therefore one-beat notes, so for tempo choose something like  $\text{minim} = 72$ . Editors sometimes eschew note reduction because it would result in the beaming of notes which would either just look ugly or run counter to the inherent rhythm of the music; provided they say so, this is all right.

The longest note-value you are likely to be called upon to play nowadays is the stemless square open note called a breve, twice the time value of the semibreve. For its name, it is obvious that it was once the shortest note in use (as for instance in the Two Alleluias from the Worcester Fragments, edited by Gilbert Rainey for Antico Edition (AE 0014), where the long editorial note, though not prescribing any precise tempo, explains the origin of the present crotchets and quavers in the longs and breves of the thirteenth century).

For much of the sixteenth century, the one-beat note, that corresponded to one stroke of the human pulse, was the semibreve. So if you can ascertain from your copy that what is now a minim (or crotchet) was once a semibreve, then you can confidently match those minims (or crotchets) to your own pulse. Of course, if you are excited, your pulse will be racing, whereas if you are bored or lethargic, it will be creeping, but there is no reason why your excitement should not appear in your playing through a bit of up-tempo. Perhaps the boredom is another matter.

Take note of the time-words at the beginning of the music, which may be Italian, English, French, German, and which benefit from a delve into the ordinary dictionaries of those languages. Thus *Largo* as well as meaning 'Broad, dignified in style' (Oxford Companion to Music) also implies 'wide, broad, liberal' (Oxford Italian Minidictionary), 'large, open-handed, bountiful' (my old 1861 Dizionario Italiano), and so on. Don't be misled by the ossified list of Italian terms that appears on some metronomes, as if *Lento* could only ever be crotchet = 40 (or whatever).



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Do take note of the time signature. Is the crotchet or the minim the beat? Remember that in 4/2 time, the semibreve COULD be the one-beat-note. Publications in which you may like to try feeling a semibreve beat are: Weelkes: Lachrimae and Three Pavans (Schott, Bib. 17) Lasso: Motet à 4 (Nova, N.M.320) Palestrina: Two Ricicare à 4 (Nova, N.M. 320). Sometimes there is inconsistency in the heading of the music, the time signature suggesting crotchet beats but the metronome mark suggesting minims, or vice versa. DO get used to minim beats (and especially the rests they involve!). Even thinking of the semibreve as the one-beat-note is a worthwhile accomplishment. Of course a quarter beat is also sometimes required and may often be resorted to in slower crotchet-beat music.

Another guide to the tempo you should adopt - even though it may smack of expediency rather than authenticity - lies in the fastest notes in the piece, i.e. those with the shortest note-values. Find these, and deduce from them a suitable tempo. Beware that you do not take simple beginnings too fast, and then come to grief when the going gets harder. Pieces that increase in complexity as they progress are legion, but it might be apposite to name a few here: Scheidt: Bergamesca à 5 (Oriol, OL 163) Pachelbel: Canon (arr. Ayre) (I.M.P.) Haydn: Flute-Clock Sonatas - II (O.U.P.) OR of course you can leave bits out when the going gets tough! Theo Wyatt invites you (if you feel the need) to do just this in the first of the Two Fugues by Haydn (Oriol, OL 152). The opposite case sometimes happens. Lyndon Hilling's 'Foxtrot' and 'Celebration Rag' (Oriol, OL120) are both lively pieces, but if you do not start the Fox trot at a lively enough pace, the middle section will fall flat.

Music with many quick notes in it can often sound the more brilliant if played at a slightly reduced speed, certainly nobody is impressed by playing that is tonally rough or rhythmically shaky because it is being played too fast. And guard against runs of quick notes automatically coming out staccato (a disease endemic among recorder players) if the music does not in fact demand staccato playing. Fast runs full of tone sound more brilliant than those cascades that sound like shattered glass or a bag of crushed potato crisps.

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The metronome provides the most handy exact way of indicating speeds, and metronome marks are much the best way of suggesting tempi nowadays, providing one does not place too much faith in them merely because they are numerate and scientific looking, and also that one does not try and adhere mechanically to their promptings. A metronome is only a device for suggesting roughly how fast (slow) a piece should go, at the point where the suggestion is made, usually at the beginning. In preparing this document I noticed that of about four hundred and fifty consort works consulted, more than two thirds lacked any metronome mark. Contemporary composers seem about equally divided between those who give metronome marks as well as tempo words, and those who prefer to rely on the latter. Arrangers and publishers of older music often seem content to leave it to the players, assuming a knowledge of the forms and styles and practices which the players may not have.

### **At rehearsal**

'Slow but sure' is a wise old maxim, and slow practice (so slow that mistakes cannot be made) is a valuable and in the long run time saving habit. On the other hand, the tenet 'the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life' may impel us to take the intended tempo at the very first playing 'whatever happens' in order to acquire the spirit of the music from the beginning, THEN to get down to the painstaking working out.

Experiment in rehearsal with different tempi (here it is assumed, that you are not up against a rapidly approaching deadline, in frantic rehearsal for an impending concert, but that you belong to the leisured classes who can afford to go over the same ground in different ways!). In other things besides tempi it is often useful to go to extremes, play too loud, recognise how brash and blatant it sounds, play too quiet, noting the weedy, emaciated tones, and then gradually reduce the excesses until you arrive at a pleasing middle ground, which need not be a featureless no man's land. (Don't make the mistake of confusing tempo and dynamics: everything that is soft does not have to be slow; all loud music is not necessarily fast. Or vice versa.) With tempi, too, this experimentation can be helpful. Moderation in all things is regarded as a good maxim for successful

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living but it is death to musical expression. Life spicing variety is much more desirable. Exaggerate! Then refine.

Timings are important in planning programmes, therefore, once you have found a desirable tempo for a particular piece, mark both it and the resultant duration on your copy for future reference. Composers and publishers vary in this respect. Some, like Bartok, consistently give metronome marks and durations for all their pieces, however small. Some give a duration, leaving the players to count the bars and work out a tempo. Some give metronome marks, often just one incontrovertible number; more usefully and realistically, a range of speeds or an indulgent 'about'. Composers sometimes have second thoughts. It is well known that Beethoven in later life was unable to believe his own earlier tempo markings. Publishers, too. Sometimes get it wrong: Rainer Glenn Bushmann's 'Moods for flutes' when first published by Moeck (Zfs 288) gave metronome marks that were way below the composer's intentions and had to be overprinted.

Not a little recorder music is published in batches: Four pavans, seven intradas, forty four canons and so on. Now one might play all seven of Valerio Buona's Fantasies (LPM IM7) at one sitting, especially if the consort were sampling new music, but one would hardly present the seven, all about the same length and all in 2/2 time, with the minim as the beat, in a concert, though one might perform two or even three. Different tempi here would help increase such variety as there might already be in the chosen group.

Questions of breathing and phrasing also have a bearing on choice of tempo. An inordinately slow tempo may weary your players and undermine their stability of tone and result in fragmentation of the music by too frequent breathing.

Consider the kinds of articulation you mean to use. Some articulations work better at a faster speed, others at a slower one.

Look for irregular groupings in the music, such as what the Americans call 'supertriplets' (i.e. triplet crotchets), and realise

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that these are easiest to perform if one feels the larger unit (in this case, the minim) as the beat.

Consider the polyphony of your chosen music, study the interlocking of the parts, observe the composite rhythm produced by all the parts together, and let these factors find expression in your choice of tempo, which should be such that the intricacies of the piece can be communicated confidently and effectively. Interlocking dotted rhythms, where one part is on the beat, the other off, are a particular instance where such care is needed.

While it is frequently desirable, having found a suitable tempo, to give the piece unity by sustaining the same tempo throughout, there are nevertheless opportunities for change of tempo within a single movement. Many Fancies consist of a string of expositions of themes, subjects, tags, that are usually contrasted in character, and such contrasts can often be enhanced by a subtle change in tempo.

Messing, meddling or monkeying with the tempo, or should I just say modifying it can often produce a good effect. I think particularly of a Gabrieli canzona that ends with two identical statements. I like the latter of these to be a slightly slower tempo than the former (and the whole piece) to lend emphasis to the final bars.

The specifying of which instruments should play, how loud and how fast, began around the turn of 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries and took time to get under way. Like most aspects of information, though, this development has been characterised ever since by a continuous accelerando. The idea of specifying how slow or how fast a piece should go only generally became necessary as the centuries progressed. For one thing, in medieval times there was only one kind of art music: that fostered in the church, and practice was everywhere the same. A musician would know the tempi of his music by long experience of a tradition that changed only slowly. The historical perspective hardly existed then. People were always performing 'the latest thing' but it might be around for a couple of generations. By contrast, we are the heirs of a whole succession of cultural periods and have to deal with many widely differing styles

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offering a bewildering variety of possibilities in the matter of tempo, as other parameters.

In many 16th century pieces such as the Fancies (Fantasias) of Michael East there are passages that look all minims and semibreves (what may be called 'white music') and other passages where the page looks all crotchets and quavers ('black music'). (These unhallowed terms of my own should not be confused with 'coloration' - a renaissance practice whereby the time-value of a note changed with its colour, white, black or even red.) 'White music' can suggest repose and can in fact go to sleep if players are not careful. Conversely, 'black music' can suggest excitement and so speed up if care is not taken, though here the extra movement may cause technical problems and slow the music down again. Keeping a constant overall tempo, where desired, is quite a difficult thing in consort music, and the need for all members of the ensemble to feel a common pulse and to keep it in mind throughout is most important.

One special problem appears in *Bride's Pagan No. II* from 'Niue auserlesene Paduanen ...' (Heinrichshofen's Verlag 1133) in which the first strain of the pavan begins in 2/2 time, but changes after a few bars to 3/2. The relation of the 3/2 is not explained, but examining the final strain we find bars of 6/4 set in some parts against 2/2 time in other parts. This enables us to deduce that the 3/2 bars near the beginning should also last one semibreve each, i.e. bar equals bar, not minim equals minim. This will have a bearing on the pace one chooses to set.

### **Further reading**

The distilled essence of all the foregoing will be found succinctly expressed in the chapter on 'Performance' of A. Rowland-Jones' seminal book on Recorder Technique (O.U.P.).

The first page and a half of the 'Tempo' section (Part Two) of Robert Donnington's book, *The Interpretation of Early Music* (Faber), is an excellent fundamental statement about this aspect of playing, and the whole section is a mine of information going into

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very great detail. But since he quotes from many, many historical writings, he is bound to adduce different views, even conflicting ones, so be prepared to have to weigh evidence and make a considered judgement.

## **Appendix**

Just as it is thought better in the long run to give the third world agricultural know-how rather than food, I have sought in all the foregoing to suggest ways in which players may explore for themselves the possibilities regarding the tempo most suitable for a chosen piece of music, rather than just prescribe tempi for different pieces without giving reasons. But in order that you may have the best of both worlds, I give below my own suggestions.

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## Tempo suggestions for dance pieces

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Alman, common time                      | crotchet = 92   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Allemande, common time                  | crotchet = 88, 96<br>quaver = 80<br>moderate duple                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Allemanda, common time                  | crotchet = 120  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ayre,            alla breve time<br>4/4 | minim = 84<br>crotchet = 104  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Air,                4/4                 | crotchet = 120 *  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Basse Danse, alla breve                 | minim = 60<br>moderate tempo, duple<br>Also, slow triple            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Borey, alla breve                       | minim = 92  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bourree                                 | quick duple, with a single beat<br>in 2/2, minim = 80 *             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Branle,            4/4                  | minim = 112<br>branle simple: duple time<br>branle gay: triple time |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Canarie                                 | dotted crotchet = 160 *   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Coranto,          6/4                   | dotted minim = 80   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Courante,        3/4                    | crotchet = 160<br>(crotchet = 80 *)<br>moderate 3/2 or 6/4          |

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<input type="checkbox"/> Corrente,	6/4	dotted minim = 72 quick triple time
<input type="checkbox"/> Corant,	3/4	crotchet = 160
<input type="checkbox"/> Chaconne (= Passacaglia)		slow triple time (crotchet = 160 *)
<input type="checkbox"/> Forlane (from Frioul, N. Italy)		crotchet = 160 *
<input type="checkbox"/> Galliard,	3/4 6/4 6/4 6/2 3/2	crotchet = 99, 112, 180 dotted minim = 69, 72 crotchet = 80 minim = 72+ minim = 126
<input type="checkbox"/> Gavotte,	4/4 (= Cebell)	minim = 72 crotchet = 92, 100 (crotchet = about 120 *)
<input type="checkbox"/> Gigue,	6/8 (French) 3/4	dotted crotchet = 92, 100 dotted minim = 88 (dotted crotchet = 160 *)
<input type="checkbox"/> Giga (Italian)		much quicker
<input type="checkbox"/> Hornpipe		moderate 3/2 or later 4/4 with Scotch snaps
<input type="checkbox"/> Loure		crotchet = 80 *
<input type="checkbox"/> Minuet,	3/4	crotchet = 88, 120, 126 originally very moderato tempo (crotchet = 160 *)
<input type="checkbox"/> Musette,	3/4 3/8	crotchet = 80 * quaver = 80 *

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<input type="checkbox"/>	Nachtanz		quick triple meter
<input type="checkbox"/>	Pavan,	4/4 4/2	crotchet = 66, 76, 82, 88, 100 minim = 66-72, 80 slow duple
<input type="checkbox"/>	Padovana		quick 6/8
<input type="checkbox"/>	Passamezzo		moderately quick duple meter
<input type="checkbox"/>	Passecaille		about crotchet = 180 *
<input type="checkbox"/>	Passepied	3/4 3/8	rather quick 3/8 or 6/8 about crotchet = 180 * about quaver = 180 *
<input type="checkbox"/>	Polka		quick duple
<input type="checkbox"/>	Polonaise		moderate triple
<input type="checkbox"/>	Rant		from Coranto?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Rigaudon,	2/2	crotchet = 160 *
<input type="checkbox"/>	Saltarello,	16 <sup>th</sup> century 14 <sup>th</sup> century 19 <sup>th</sup> century	quick triple time slower much quicker
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sarabande,	3/4  16 <sup>th</sup> century later	crotchet = 62, 76, 108 minim = 63! (crotchet = 80 *) slow triple quick 3/4 or alternate 3/4 and 3/8
<input type="checkbox"/>	Schottische		slow polka (Ecoisaise is much quicker)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Siciliano		very moderate 6/8 or 12/8

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|-------------------------------------|-----|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Strathspey |     | slow 4/4  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tambourin  |     | about crotchet = 180 *  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tarquenard |     | defective ambling of a horse in<br>alla breve time with dotted<br>rhythms |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tourdion,  | 3/4 | crotchet = 120  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Waltz      |     | moderate triple time  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Zortziko   |     | fast 5/8 with dotted rhythms  |

\* quoted from Donnington's 'The Interpretation of Early Music', Faber 1963, where they are derived from Quantz.

The bulk of the above information is culled from recorder consort publications in my library, and from 'The Harvard Dictionary of Music', Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951.

Anyone hoping for a quick fix for playing dance music at the 'correct' tempo will realise that even from this brief list that the question is fraught with difficulty, ambiguity, uncertainty; it can be resolved only by careful consideration of relevant historical information and the expected circumstances of performance.



## The Society of Recorder Players

The Society exists to provide amateur recorder players with an opportunity to play and advance in all styles of music.

There are Branches all over the country which meet at least every month to play under the direction of a variety of conductors.

For further details  
consult [www.srp.org.uk](http://www.srp.org.uk) or  
contact the SRP Secretary ([secretary@srp.org.uk](mailto:secretary@srp.org.uk))



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