



William Barnhart directs the Mid-Peninsula Recorder Orchestra during one of its first meetings in November of 1962. Photo from the *Palo Alto Times*.

MPRO The Early Days (1962-1967)

Part 1

by
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The story has now become almost legendary: In the spring of 1962 Ampex engineer William Barnhart invited some of his fellow recorder players to a day of music making in the woods of Huddart Park. About one hundred and fifty people showed up. Encouraged by this turnout, he decided to form an ensemble in the Palo Alto area devoted to exploring the musical repertoire for recorders and other early instruments. The first meeting of this ensemble took place at Loma Vista Elementary School in Palo Alto on September 5, 1962, and the Mid-Peninsula Recorder Orchestra was born. “I didn’t know quite what to expect at our first meeting,” Bill said during an

interview published in the November 6, 1962 issue of the *Palo Alto Times*. “I didn’t know how the degrees of talent and different kinds of instruments would balance out. But the result was wonderful. They sounded great.” Bill went on to explain that one of the reasons for forming the ensemble was his desire to promote amateur music making: “The reason I went for a recorder group was not because of the old instruments as such, but because they’re better suited for amateur music.” Another reason for Bill’s forming this new ensemble was to give recorder players the experience of playing with others and raise each member’s performance standards. In 1962, there were no organizations devoted to amateur recorder playing on the Peninsula, and the nearest chapters of the American Recorder Society were in Berkeley and Marin County. So, there was a real need for the kind of ensemble Bill had established to serve the large number of recorder players who lived in Palo Alto and the surrounding cities. Bill also added in the interview, “It’s also fun for me, too. I always wanted to conduct a group like this. I’m having a ball.” In a short history of MPRO by Phil Hand and Angela Owen, charter members of the orchestra, first published in the September 1981 issue of the MPRO newsletter, we find a slightly different slant on Bill’s experiences as a fledgling conductor: “...people would gather once a week...and give Bill every opportunity to learn the trials and tribulations of an aspiring conductor: ---‘separate those notes!’ ---‘Throw it away!’ ---‘Is your instrument pushed all the way in?’ ---‘Don’t speed up!’ ---‘don’t slow down!’”

Under Bill’s direction the essential features of the orchestra were established. From the outset MPRO included great bass recorders as well as the common varieties from soprano through bass. Capped double reeds, krummhorns and sorduns, were part of the orchestra from the beginning, as was a viola da gamba. By 1966 a harpsichord had also been added. There was also a strong commitment to regular performance, and this had been one of Bill’s goals when establishing the orchestra. MPRO’s first concert took place on May 6, 1963, and the program featured the orchestra as well as small ensembles made up of MPRO members and guest performers. While Bill was director, the orchestra appeared on Public Television station KQED, performed at the Palace of the Legion of Honor and gave concerts in the Palo Alto area. Members of MPRO provided the recorders needed for two performances of *Noye’s Fludde* by Benjamin Britten presented on May 3 and 5 of 1967 in Palo Alto. Consorts representing MPRO also took part in community outreach activities during the orchestra’s first five years and performed for a wide variety of local organizations. The first workshop presented by MPRO took place in 1963 and was directed by LaNoue

Davenport. Over the next four years, the orchestra presented workshops directed by Friedrich von Huene, Gloria Ramsey and Hans Ulrich Staeps.

MPRO meetings were originally weekly. In 1965, the orchestra's meeting location was changed to Gunn High School in Palo Alto, and in 1966 meetings began to be held monthly and were divided into three parts: First, there would be performances by small ensembles, next everyone would participate in orchestral playing and finally those attending would be divided into two groups, each working on separate music with its own conductor.

The first four years of the orchestra's existence were the result of a team effort on the part of Bill and his wife Ilse to make MPRO a viable musical organization. In addition to playing recorder and viola da gamba in the orchestra, Ilse also took on several essential duties during those four years. These included collecting membership dues, ordering music from Germany and welcoming newcomers to the orchestra. When MPRO was reorganized in 1966 and a set of officers began to oversee its operation, Ilse served as consort coordinator and helped members of the orchestra form and maintain small ensembles. The reorganization that took place was meant to increase the orchestra's membership and overall member participation in its activities as well as to relieve Bill and Ilse of many of the routine tasks involved in running MPRO. Part of the reorganization also involved making Angela Owen co-conductor of the orchestra at its meetings along with Bill Barnhart so that the members present could be divided at the end of each session into two large ensembles. Bill continued as MPRO's music director, selecting music for meetings and performances, conducting concerts and arranging for performance venues as well as guest artists. Reminders sent to the membership in advance of monthly meetings began in November of 1966 and contained a list of the music scheduled to be played, news items and other announcements. By May of 1967 these reminders had become a newsletter for the orchestra.

(To be continued in the November issue of Upbeat)