

MPRO

The Early Days (1962-1967)

Part 2

by
Frederic Palmer

MPRO's success over the last half century is rooted in the first five years of its existence thanks to a fortunate confluence of various circumstances that not only made the orchestra possible but also thrive during its early days. These include its location in Palo Alto and particularly its proximity to Stanford University and the early music activity at that institution. One of the first guest directors of the orchestra was Dr. George Houle who later became head of Stanford's early music performance program. Although there was a great deal of early music available to recorder players at that time, how to approach the performance of that music from an historical perspective was generally unknown. Dr. Houle, who was one of the pioneers in what has come to be known as the historically informed performance movement, was a key influence in guiding the early members of MPRO toward a better understanding of how music from past periods can be played and interpreted using surviving source materials. During its first two years at least five MPRO members were associated with Stanford University, some as faculty members, and at least two others were employed by the Stanford Research Institute in nearby Menlo Park. Aside from these informal ties with Stanford, there was the large pool of amateur recorder players in and around Palo Alto who gravitated into the orchestra. During the early 1960s, recorder playing was transformed from a quaint curiosity into an esoteric craze. KQED offered a series of televised classes whereby the viewer could learn the recorder through video group instruction. And if you did not own a recorder, you could purchase an instrument from the Public Television station. Interest in recorder playing spanned the entire demographic and social gamut, from young people to retirees, accomplished professionals to salaried workers and the self-employed, students and professors, traditionalists and budding "flower children," liberals and conservatives. All of these groups seemed to come together en masse whenever there was an opportunity to explore what music for the recorder

had to offer. For example, attendance at the meetings of the ARS chapter in Berkeley in the early 1960s usually numbered in the fifties and sixties and may have even been larger on occasion. Moreover, people, in general, had more leisure time in those days. Single income households were the norm, and even parents with growing families were able to participate in activities involving the recorder.

Around 1960, the quality of recorders available to the general public was also improving. Some of the first members of MPRO owned instruments made by Carl Dolmetsch, said to be at the time the “Stradivarius of recorders.” Within a few years, Friedrich von Huene began producing recorders that equaled or exceeded the quality of historical instruments, and his recorders also found their way into the orchestra. As a result, technical and particularly intonation problems, for which the recorder was up to that point notorious, began to become less frequent or at least less excusable. It was also during the early 1960s that professional recorder soloists and ensembles began to emerge. In the Bay Area, Ken Wollitz gave solo performances and formed a recorder consort (of which Bill Barnhart was an alternate member). Recordings of other soloists and ensembles also began to be released: The New York Pro Musica, LaNoue Davenport, Bernard Krainis and the Krainis Consort, Carl Dometsch, Frans Brüggén and the Collegium Terpsichore. It was also at this time that there seemed to be new and wonderful pieces by Vivaldi or Telemann on the radio every week, many of which included recorders, and recorders began to be heard in motion picture soundtracks (*Becket*, 1964). The recorder was now becoming a new and exciting professional instrument and one that anyone could learn to play. This was in no small part responsible for the enthusiasm that kept MPRO growing and thriving during its first five years.

Bill Barnhart’s leadership was also a decisive factor in the success of the orchestra during that period. Of MPRO’s three music directors, Bill’s tenure was the shortest but had the greatest impact on the organization. His background as a vocal and instrumental musician, his interest in a wide range of musical styles and periods, his organizational skills and ability to work with community and social organizations, some of which he helped form, as well as his unassuming and congenial personality and an infectious enthusiasm he brought to everything he pursued were crucial to providing the early orchestra with a solid foundation from which to continue and grow. When Bill told those attending an MPRO meeting in October of 1967 that he was leaving the Bay Area to further his career as an engineer with a startup company in Grass Valley, California, the reaction of the membership was summarized in an article that appeared in the orchestra’s newsletter the

following month: "...we were left quite bewildered. MPRO without Bill seems unthinkable, especially for those of us who have been with him at the start...Bill's brainchild was born from a desire to give the unaffiliated local recorder players a chance to meet and play together, and was nurtured by his enthusiasm, inspired leadership, and plain, hard, time-consuming work... We have come a long way, and our achievements many...None of this could have been done without Bill, and of course, he could not have done it without Ilse!...MPRO will carry on, hoping that Bill returns some day to conduct us again..." (Bill did conduct MPRO again on June 7, 1992 as one of the guest directors appearing in the spring concert celebrating the orchestra's thirtieth anniversary.)

What the early members of the orchestra probably did not realize and what did not become apparent until decades later was that Bill was also an innovator and visionary. When Bill formed MPRO there were no similar musical organizations in the United States and the only other large ensemble of recorders that performed regularly was in Germany. So Bill was virtually starting a recorder orchestra from scratch. Moreover, MPRO was the first organization of its kind to call itself a "recorder orchestra," and Bill settled on using that term as part of the name for the ensemble he had created very early on. I visited Bill, who now lives in Nevada City, California, this past August and showed him a list of all the recorder orchestras that now exist throughout the world. There are at least fifty-five located in eleven different countries. Bill was amazed to discover what he had helped begin.