

# MPRO

## The Middle Years (1968-1987)

### Part 1

by  
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When Bill Barnhart announced in the fall of 1967 that he would be leaving the San Francisco Bay Area and stepping down as MPRO's music director the result could easily have been the end of the orchestra's existence. Fortunately, there was someone available who was eminently qualified to take his place, and that was Dr. Angela Owen. Angela Owen held a Ph.D. in musicology, had been active in the local recorder community for many years, had taught recorder and was a charter member and officer of the orchestra as well as co-conductor at its meetings. While maintaining the essential features of the orchestra that the Barnharts had established, Angela structured MPRO along the lines of a permanent musical organization. This included by-laws, a board of directors, regular newsletters, a season with set concerts and archived records of the orchestra's activities. Angela served as president and music director starting in late 1967, and the first performance of the orchestra under her direction took place in December of that year. During her tenure the orchestra's numbers grew, due in no small part to the recorder classes taught by Angela that furnished MPRO with a steady supply of new members, and it developed close ties with the city of Palo Alto's Division of Arts and Culture, eventually giving annual performances under the city's auspices at the Palo Alto Cultural Center. Over the next twenty years the orchestra also performed at various other locations in Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties including Little House in Menlo Park, the Palo Alto Senior Center (now Avenidas), the Unitarian Fellowship (now the Unitarian Universalists) of San Mateo, Pilgrim Haven (now The Terraces) in Los Altos, the Peninsula Jewish Community Center then located in Belmont and the Palo Alto Children's Theatre. It also appeared on Public Television station KCSM in 1971.

As MPRO's new music director, Angela maintained the format for meetings that had been established during the orchestra's first five years. This included dividing the members present into two groups for part of the meeting with one lead by a co-conductor, now given the official position of assistant director. The members would be divided by three main criteria

depending on current needs and circumstances: (1) playing level and difficulty of music, (2) concert preparation versus recreational playing and (3) increased choice of repertoire. Assistant directors were also responsible for leading the entire membership in rare instances when the music director was absent and, early on, also directed portions of concerts. MPRO's assistant directors and their years of service included Dave Berry (1968-1969), Rex Hughes (1969-1970), Mary Hoover (1973-1976) and Don Forbes (1975-1976). After 1976 it was decided that the membership no longer needed to be divided into separate groups during meetings and the position of assistant director was eliminated. Angela also continued to devote portions of meetings to performances by small ensembles made up of members of the orchestra. This served two purposes: (1) to give the ensemble's members the opportunity to play in a studio recital situation and hone their performing skills and (2) to give the members present the opportunity to hear how certain selections they were working on sounded. Guest directors were also a common feature at MPRO meetings, and there were frequent workshops sponsored by the orchestra as well. Workshop and guest directors included Nancy Bloomer Deussen, George Houle, Lyle Nordstrom, Bruce Haynes, Peter Ballinger, Joanna Bramel Young, Ken Johnson, Eileen Hadidian, Gabrielle Stocker and Arlene Sagan.

Starting with MPRO's 1968-69 season the number of meetings per month was increased to two, and these usually took place on first and third Wednesdays, a scheduling pattern that the orchestra still follows today. In 1972, MPRO joined Capa Council For The Arts, Palo Alto, a coordinating body for professional and non-professional groups dedicated to promoting the audio and visual arts. In 1975, the MPRO board decided to begin paying a nominal fee per meeting to the orchestra's music director and a mileage allowance to assistant directors. In 1976, the location of MPRO meetings was changed to Green Gables (now Duveneck) Elementary School in Palo Alto. In 1978, the Palo Alto Unified School District required MPRO to provide its own liability insurance, and in 1983, it began charging the orchestra for use of the facilities at the school. While these additional expenses were covered by minimal increases in membership dues, they also established a budgeting process whereby the orchestra took into account the need for paid directors, funding for affiliations with other organizations as well as insurance premiums and rental fees for meeting and performing venues, all of which would require significant financial planning in the future.

With the September 1982 issue, the name of the orchestra's newsletter was changed to *Upbeat*, and in the January 1983 issue, the column,

“Conductor’s Corner,” made its debut. In the November 1986 issue, Angela Owen announced that she would be retiring as MPRO’s music director and president at the end of the 1986-1987 season. This major transition for the orchestra was facilitated by Angela’s guidance and input from the membership over the following months. By April of 1987 it was decided to keep MPRO an independent musical organization, a new board was selected for the 1987-1988 season with Mary Ashley as president, a search committee was established to find a new music director and the by-laws were updated to reflect current practices and insure that all necessary functions of the orchestra were adequately administered. MPRO would be going into its twenty-fifth season with new leadership and a new conductor.

*(To be continued in the February issue of Upbeat)*