

The Emergence of Early Music in Seattle

How recorder players helped to launch the early music movement

by Peter Seibert

Overview:

The small, fervent group of recorder players during the 1950s and 1960s grew dramatically in the first half of the 1970s, paving the way for the formation of the Early Music Guild of Seattle (EMG) at the middle of the decade.

Nourished by the Northwest Recorder Course (NWRC) starting in 1968, the members of the Seattle Recorder Society (SRS) became more knowledgeable as well as more curious. SRS attendance exploded. Playing quality improved along with the demand for professional instruction and performances.

The dramatic growth of the SRS after 1970 led to more classes, which fueled greater interest in historical instruments and historically-informed performance, a logical outgrowth of which was the creation of the EMG.

The earliest mention of recorder activity in Seattle media appears to have been in 1952. Articles appeared in both the Seattle Times (ST) and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer (P-I) in March¹ and were written in advance of a March program presented by the Seattle Recorder Guild at the auditorium of the University of Washington Music School.

According to the footnote on the program, the Guild “was founded in 1949... for the purpose of bringing together amateurs who play, or would like to play, the recorder and who are interested in investigating old and new music for the instrument.”²

¹ ST, 9 March 1952; P-I, 12 March 1952.

² Mimeographed program

The Times article describes the appearance of the instruments, discusses the repertory, and mentions the young American Recorder Society (then just an organization in New York City). The P-I writer covers some of the same information but seemed puzzled by what he heard. "It sounds like the dying echoes of a wooden xylophone or a piccolo played in an apple box, as if the player were wearing mittens when fingering the holes...It has a sound all its own." At the time, the Seattle Recorder Guild apparently was comprised of five players.

A substantially more comprehensive article appeared in the Times four years later and indicates that the Guild had about 40 members of which 10 would regularly gather to "toot" together.³ Occasional performances were given during the period apparently involving about five players.

As awareness of recorders increased, particularly among those associated with the University of Washington, concert programs from the early 1960's show recorder performances by several different organizations, among them, the Collegium Musicum at the University of Washington, the Department of Languages also at the UW, and the first mention of a Seattle Recorder Society. It is of note that many of the same recorder players seemed to appear in each of these organizations.⁴

Starting in 1960, the American Recorder Society began to welcome chapters in cities across North America. The Seattle Chapter of the American Recorder Society was granted a charter on 6 July 1964, and while this provided gravitas for the local players, it also placed expectations on them. All members of the local chapter also must pay additional dues to the national organization. Starting at this time, the nomenclature used by Seattle recorder players becomes confused. Members went to "ARS meetings," although it was still a local activity.⁵

It was not until there were mismanagement issues in the national ARS office that the Seattle Recorder Society would become incorporated as a separate organization a decade later. Nonetheless, Seattle recorder activities were on the cusp of a sudden growth, both in size and sophistication.

³ ST, 15 January 1956,

⁴ Mimeo and Ditto programs 1955-63

⁵ Charter from ARS

Although the nominal membership the SRS was larger, attendance at meetings would be less than a dozen. Meetings would take place at the University Music Center. This music store in the University District was the only place that carried recorders and recorder music, and it was a natural place to meet for a small group.

What led to an explosion of recorder activity was the advent in 1968 of the Northwest Recorder Course (NWRC), a week-long summer workshop not associated with the Seattle Recorder Society. It provided much-needed instruction, both about recorder technique and also about repertory. There were seven of these summer workshops through 1975, and participation as well as the level of knowledge grew with each year.



The faculty of the first Northwest Recorder Course in August 1968.
L. to R. Standing: Peter Seibert, Dennis Bamforth, Colin Martin. Kneeling: Don Winter

The NWRC was directed by Colin Martin and Dennis Bamforth, who ran a similar workshop in England called the Northern Recorder Course. Also on the faculty in 1968 was Peter Seibert, and Donald and Jenny Winter were the local hosts and administrators. At first, the workshop

was held at Emmanuel Episcopal Church on Mercer Island. Over the years, this summer workshop migrated to Mercer Island High School, the UW Music School, and the UW Lake Wilderness facility.⁶ Eventually, the NWRC faculty grew to seven and included senior recorder teachers and soloists from Europe and Canada.

Locally, the Seattle Recorder Society gained members annually, a natural outgrowth of the energy provided at the summer workshops. Bit by bit, playing ability grew. For the first time, the SRS needed music directors. During the 1969-70 season a triumvirate was appointed: Peggy Monroe, Marilu Saunders, and Peter Seibert. Typically, meetings started with short performances by a few players, then divided into three playing groups based on technical ability.⁷

In September 1970, the music directorship was consolidated into one position; Peter Seibert became music director (MD) and would continue in this position for 45 years. A seasoned conductor, he was able to bring together large numbers of players with diverse abilities and to provide a rewarding experience for the participants.

Coinciding with the consolidation of the MD position, the experienced editor Mary Adams started the monthly Recorder Notes; Volume I, Number 1 (hereafter indentified as "RN I, 1") was published in September 1970.⁸ The newsletter was mailed to members each month during the October to May season. After editing all submissions, Adams gave her handwritten copy to Frances DeGermain, who would type it on mimeograph stencil, run it off on her mimeograph printer at Boeing, hand address each copy at home, and take the bundles to the Post Office in time to alert members about the next meeting. These two women kept the SRS informed for over twenty years and were of great significance to the growth of the organization.

⁶ cf. Brown paper sample brochures

⁷ The latter director recalls meetings divided into Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced players. The Beginners were nurtured; the Intermediates were unable to get through pieces without help from some Advanced players, whose group was in turn depleted.

⁸ RN I,1

The basic role of RN, to announce the time, place, and repertory for the next meeting, seems not to have been enough for the recorder community. With excellent editing and timely distribution, it attracted contributions from a variety of authors. Reviews of the preceding meeting were a monthly staple. Reviews of concerts, workshops, and articles in quarterly journals became additional features; some of these were written by knowledgeable authors, among which were scholars, professional musicians, and sophisticated amateurs. In addition to reviews, informative articles about instruments, technique, playing style, and other helpful insights were provided for readers. Technical terms about performance practice now entered conversations.

As seen in RN volume I, it is clear that SRS had no home base. Meetings moved each month, including a visit to Bainbridge Island. Yet interest continued to develop. Tapping into the momentum established in the summer NWRC events, the MD offered one-day workshops that also used the name Northwest Recorder Course. For these, he was usually joined by another faculty member. These workshops drew well.⁹

“The day-long recorder course at The Lakeside School on November 14 found itself inundated with 62 applicants.”¹⁰

With the start of the next season, the regular site for meetings became the school building on the north side of the St. Mark’s Cathedral parking lot. (The building has gone through several names since then.) Because a bus stop was located near the building, inquisitive potential members could easily get to meetings to test their interest, and many chose to continue attending.¹¹

The backbone of monthly meetings consisted of conducted large group playing, but meetings often started with short presentations on topics that would expand the interest and knowledge of recorder players. In the next few seasons, presentations would include harpsichord building, talks by musicologists on history and style, other early wind instruments, percussion, and viola da gamba.

The NWRC attracted some Canadian recorder players, and a strong link was established between the SRS and the British Columbia Recorder

⁹ RN I, 3, 5

¹⁰ RN I, 3

¹¹ RN II, 1

Society (BCRS). Some Canadians came to SRS meeting and became members of the SRS, and some SRS members crossed the border to attend meetings in Vancouver.

The first mention of the term *early music* in RN is found in the spring of 1972:¹² there would be a week-long Early Music Workshop at the University of Victoria in August, and the faculty of five would provide classes in recorder, lute, viol, and Renaissance band. That was the summer that the NWRC was on hiatus, and 20 SRS members attended. An extensive review of the Victoria workshop was written in the opening newsletter of the 1972-73 season.¹³

For the first time, the recorder community focus began to expand beyond activities for recorders. The Victoria workshop had included instruments that could be learned by recorder players (e.g., Krumphorns) and suggested possible inclusion of viols in ensemble. The issue of *pitch* also entered discussions. Low-pitch recorders at A=415 started to be available. Questions of performance practice also started to appear.

Starting with Recorder Notes volume III, the column, "From the Music Director," would lead off each issue. In commenting upon a presentation at the preceding SRS meeting and NWRC the following day, the MD wrote,

"After hearing Paul Palmer's talk on ornamentation...we realize how limited our perspective about interpretation has been. Most of us have been brought up with the musical ideals of the nineteenth century orchestral musician. We seek to render the printed page as faithfully as possible. Having done that, we move along to another piece of music. Our contemporary jazz musicians have a very different view of music, and this view is probably closer to that of the performer of 1695 than is ours. The players of the baroque period saw the printed page of music as a point of departure rather than as a rigid model."¹⁴

SRS membership continued to grow, and attendance at some meetings approached 100. Although the gymnasium where meetings were held could accommodate these numbers, the musical results were sometimes unrewarding. Splitting off advanced players to play in their

¹² RN II, 8

¹³ RN III, 1

¹⁴ RN III, 3 An extensive review of Palmer's workshop follows the MD comments.

own consorts seemed feasible, and that was accomplished because of the availability of nearby classrooms.¹⁵

In order to broaden the intellectual input for SRS members, MD drew attention to the well-established *Recorder and Music Magazine*, a British publication for recorder players, and subscription information was provided for SRS members.¹⁶

Oxford University Press launched *Early Music* magazine the same year, and this quarterly was of even more importance for the musical world. The final issue of RN for the 1972-73 season contains short reviews by the MD of every article in the inaugural issue of *Early Music*. These articles covered a broad range of early music topics as well as commentary about historical instruments in the hands of contemporary musicians and aficionados. In this issue, an edition of a Renaissance chanson – ostensibly vocal music - is included, and an article in the issue demonstrates eight “proper” ways to perform it, including using only recorders. Other articles in this issue are about early percussion instruments, Renaissance Europe through Japanese Eyes, early pianos, and the recent Bruges recorder competition. Subscription information is provided for SRS members.¹⁷

This became a turning point in a budding early music movement.

Awareness was growing, for example, that recorders in the Renaissance did not look like the ones being played in the 1970’s. If they looked different, how might they sound? Finding answers to questions like that led to the growing body of knowledge about historical instruments and historical performance practice.

There was lively activity in both modern approaches to recorder as well as the growing interest in the broader aspects of early music. The 1973 NWRC, held at the University of Washington School of Music, had 130 participants and included a division for modern strings. On the other hand, two weeks earlier, 22 Seattle players received a different musical

¹⁵ RN III, 1

¹⁶ RN III, 6

¹⁷ RN III, 8

experience when they attended the University of Victoria Early Music Workshop.¹⁸

The SRS itself became more diverse in instrumental resources. A write-up of the season opening meeting calls it “a milestone...for the presence of buzzies, cornet, viols and lute among the recorders.”¹⁹ In the same issue, the MD introduced a new periodic column called “In the Journals,” in which there are brief summaries of all relevant articles from *American Recorder*, *Recorder and Music Magazine*, and *Early Music*.

There was also ongoing and increasing mention of more traditional (i.e., modern) recorder activities in the issues of *Recorder Notes* over the next years. New music written for recorders continued to appear for large group playing, and the SRS twice provided more than the minimum required number of players for the Seattle Opera performances of Benjamin Britten’s *Noah’s Flood*.²⁰

In March 1974, there was another first for local musicians, a viola da gamba weekend workshop. Nine local SRS members attended along with five players from farther off. All of the local players were recorder players who wished to expand their experience playing early music.²¹

By May of that year, the SRS was playing from a critical edition of early music in the *Musica Britannica* series. At this meeting, there were three choirs of instruments: recorders, viols, and Renaissance winds (mostly Krummhorns). In his final comments for the season, the MD laments:

“If I have any regret about the current state of affairs in the Seattle Recorder Society, it is that we are so large now (around 160 members) that I don’t know a lot of our members.”²²

A lengthy list of instrument makers is also provided in this issue; it includes makers of harpsichords, viols, and early wind instruments.

By the autumn of 1974, it is evident that the early music movement is increasingly influential on the activities of the SRS. As has been shown,

¹⁸ RN IV, 1 contains lengthy review of both workshop by members.

¹⁹ RN IV, 2

²⁰ RN IV, 2 – 5; Reviews from *Seattle Times* and *Seattle P-I*.

²¹ RN IV, 7 Workshop review.

²² RN IV, 8

recorder playing was now only one part of SRS meetings. Choral singing had been offered as a secondary activity at summer workshops initially intended for instrumentalists. A Palestrina Mass for voices and viols, in which members could sing, was the opening program of the November SRS meeting. In the same issue of RN appeared a review of the Berkeley early music workshop, one that coexisted with the NWRC as well as the University of Victoria Early Music Workshop. Early music activity was humming on the West Coast.²³

The early music tide did not impede the traditional involvement of the SRS, and it again provided the needed recorder choir for another Seattle Opera production of Noah's Flood, this time in Burien.²⁴ And modern music written for recorders was welcome; such works were frequently done at SRS meetings.

The summer of 1975 was particularly rich for recorder players and budding players of other instruments. In Victoria, the early music workshop offered opportunities for recorder players and viol players, harpsichordist and Renaissance dancers, and choral music in the evening.

During the same summer, SRS members were offered two divisions of the NWRC, a three-day local non-residential workshop open to all players, and a week-long residential workshop at Lake Wilderness with limited registration for advanced players of recorder and viol. In the latter workshop, singing or playing an Isaac mass was a daily option.²⁵

In Seattle, local ensembles now gave high-level performances of early music. The May 1976 RN includes reviews of a Renaissance dance workshop, the Monteverdi Vespers, Purcell's Dido and Aeneas, and the second performance of Duo Geminiani, which had recently become resident in Seattle.²⁶

Recorder Notes (RN) continued to gain stature as a publication. A number of local musicians and knowledgeable amateurs contributed reviews and informational articles relating to early music. Among these contributors were Randall Jay (Randy) McCarty and Jerome (Jerry)

²³ RN V, 2

²⁴ Seattle Opera Program, 15 March 1975

²⁵ RN VI, 1

²⁶ RN VI, 8

Kohl. The McCarty pieces included reviews, advanced notices of concerts, comments on his own ensemble (Western Wynde), and the Berkeley Early Music Symposium.²⁷ Kohl contributions include reviews of seminars and concerts, informative comments about instruments, and several lengthy criticisms.²⁸

Again in June 1976, the NWRC offered a three-day summer workshop for local musicians. It was divided into three groups according to level; repertory was varied and was not strictly devoted to early music.

With the departure of their director, the Victoria workshop stopped functioning. But immediately, the University of British Columbia (UBC) took up the slack. In summers starting in 1976, UBC early music activities included a week-long workshop for amateur recorder players as well as other workshops (e.g. “baroque workshop”) for serious players.

A review of the UBC workshop along with several reviews of the 8th NWRC appear in the opening RN issue in the fall of 1976. The UBC workshop now presented the broader possibilities of early music; the NWRC offered new compositions and also arrangements of old music as had been the practice of this workshop.²⁹

The experience within the SRS was becoming more comprehensive as knowledge about the growing field of early music was now available to a large membership. However, although there were occasional concerts of touring professionals with some connection to early music activities, the only organization in Seattle to give structure to the early music movement at this time was the SRS.

It was now clear that there was a need for a new organization devoted to the field of early music beyond a focus on recorders, one that could bring top quality touring groups to Seattle with regularity, could offer support to numerous local performers, and could educate the public about early music repertory and performance practice.

This need was accompanied by opportunity; there was, through the SRS, a large knowledgeable public to mobilize. It was inevitable that

²⁷ RN IV, 2; RN IV, 6; RN IV, 8; RN V, 2; RN V, 8

²⁸ RN VI, 2; RN VI, 3; RN VI, 5, 6, 7; RN VII, 3, 5, 7, 8

²⁹ RN VII, 1

discussions about forming a new organization would start in 1976. The Early Music Guild of Seattle (EMG) was incorporated in 1977, and among the founders were aforementioned Jerry Kohl and Randy McCarty.

Following the formation of the new organization, EMG and SRS would pursue different agenda. EMG largely focused on professional musicians and performance, while SRS continued to provide a varied experience for amateur musicians that centered on making music together. Seattle needed both organizations. Many in the SRS became part of the first audiences of the EMG. They attended concerts, and that encouraged some SRS members to strive to improve their own playing.

From a broader perspective, the arts culture in Seattle had become enriched. On the one hand, audiences were now able to attend a coordinated concert series of a previously underrepresented genre; on the other, a successful organization that already encouraged community participation continued to welcome the musical public. Both organizations were strengthened and, in turn, contributed to the growth of the arts in Seattle. Without the SRS contribution, EMG would eventually have come into existence, but the framework and energy of the SRS nurtured and hastened its development.

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The SRS lost its venue in 1981 and moved to a new home, the Maple Leaf Lutheran Church in the north end of Seattle. The church is not located near public transportation, and the SRS experienced a modest drop in membership and attendance.

Nonetheless, the SRS spawned the Port Townsend Early Music Workshop, first presented in July 1983 as an alternate-year workshop, and the workshop went on to become well known across North America as one of the largest and most successful early music workshops in the country.

Sources for all footnotes may be found in the archive of the Seattle Recorder Society.