

NATIONAL YOUTH RECORDER ORCHESTRA

Inaugural course and concert, June 2002

Report by Colin Touchin, Musical Director

In May 2001, news of the unexpected benefaction to the SRP, and request for proposals to use this capital to support new initiatives in recorder playing and development spurred me to put forward an outline for a course and concert by an auditioned ensemble under the name National Youth Recorder Orchestra. I am deeply grateful for the ready and enthusiastic reception to this proposal from the SRP Committee and particularly the Chairman Andrew Short, who worked fervently to assist the plans with applications to additional grant-giving bodies, and in raising interest and support for the project within and beyond the Society.

As the name NYRO was first suggested to me by my music teacher at grammar school, Dennis Bamforth, I invited him (to realise his dream) and his colleague Colin Martin to conduct on this first course, knowing their enthusiasm and skill in work with this ensemble. I proposed some names to the Committee for additional sectional coaches and other names were also suggested, the final four engaged being Helen Hooker, Ross Winters, Marion Scott, and David Kinsell - these have wide and varied experiences of tuition and recorder orchestral repertoire and performance. Later, house staff names were offered from a variety of sources, and a final team of seven was invited, whose experiences were mostly as teachers and recorder enthusiasts, as well as parents of players selected to be in the ensemble.

Initial dates considered were Easter 2002, a tie-in with the Annual SRP Festival, then Summer 2002, but finally an approach from Tim Cranmore, who was coincidentally organising the Great Malvern Recorder Weekend, seemed to offer an effective centre to launch the ensemble, and it was timed around the Queen's Jubilee Weekend, which uniquely altered school half-term holiday dates for 2002 and indicated, despite inevitable nearness to school and national exams., a potential for good attendance.

An administrator was found in Tamsyn Steel, a postgraduate at the University of Warwick who was working as temporary Music Secretary for my office; we visited the site of a school in Malvern, St. James, proposed by Tim, and facilities for sectional and full rehearsals, accommodation, food, and recreation and other arrangements seemed to be well ordered for our purposes.

Auditions were announced in the music press, applications were sought by letters to ERTA members and other known teachers and conservatoires, colleges and specialist schools, and the major circulation of SRP members was achieved through distribution with the Recorder magazine via Recorder MusicMail. 90 forms were entered, of which some 51 attended for live audition in London (Royal College of Music) and Birmingham (Conservatoire) - four applications requesting a third initial site in Newcastle were too few to warrant the expense of hiring a venue and paying for the panel to travel up, so these and the remainder submitted tapes or discs. Colin Martin and Dennis assessed the live auditions, and Colin Touchin the recordings.

The programme chosen was to begin with one of the first pieces written for the Recorder Orchestra in the format and concept addressed here, Paul Clark's Variations on Scarborough Fair, and to include works chosen by the three conductors: appositely one of Walter Bergmann's works was chosen in his centenary year, the Chaconietta which required a solo cello (adding balance and variety to the concert's sound-world: a second-year student at the Birmingham Conservatoire, Emily Fry, was the soloist); I chose my own

Sinfonia Aquilonia as one of the substantial and intricate works which would provide body to the programme and challenge to the musicians, and also John Hawkes' Geodesic, to show the possibilities of the ensemble in aleatoric and genuinely contemporary techniques; Dennis' own Shetland Suite and Page Nine Variations, along with Colin Martin's choices, the Moses' Rigs, Jigs and Reels, and Phil the Fluter Variations by Maurice Bale from Coventry, completed the programme.

Invitations were sent to 63 players, of whom 59 attended. They came from as far north as Isle of Lewis and south from Guernsey, aged 10 3/4 (this youngest attended with her mother on the house staff) up to 22 (this oldest player, Naomi Winterburn, was also a house staff member, and would be ideal as a future Administrator of the musical aspects of the ensemble). Standards were generally high, with some individuals showing strong technique and musicianship: some players on the recordings were less secure, particularly in tone and intonation. Some dozen auditioned with bass or lower, as well as treble and descant, and questioning revealed potential for playing larger instruments. Information and parts (as determined from willingness to play other than the middle instruments) were posted out about three weeks before the course (later than hoped, due to enormous office pressures), and the course could begin.

We contacted various sources to borrow the bigger instruments and in particular the Stockport Recorder College provided on loan several basses and greats.

On the first day, Friday 31st May, some confusion arose at reception, as Tim's events required more assistance than he had supplied - it put our own staff in extra position of responsibilities that should not have been: nevertheless, the house staff displayed throughout the day and the whole course, remarkable calmness, professionalism, humour and generosity of spirit. Prior arrangements for transportation from the station had been shared by Tamsyn and Jules Prosser, a new graduate from Warwick, who acted on the course as administrator - several taxi journeys eventually gathered everyone together. Mostly we got everyone in their right rooms, from a plan of the two-/three-/four-/six-bed dorms. we pre-set, but some swapping took place which caused a little upset in some of the sensitive youngsters. My own facility consisted of sleeping on the floor of the Games Masters Office, as, due to over-booking by Tim's groups, there was nowhere else I could go - though it did provide me the one outside phone line I could use to stay in email contact with our office in Coventry!

Sectional coaches were to arrive during days 2 to 5 of the course, and the first evening rehearsal began with each conductor working through some of the approachable pieces for a workshop performance the very next day as part of the GMRW. The sounds that evening were often horrendous! - however good individually the players, and however much some may have practised, it took more than a while to get everyone thinking and playing like an orchestra.

Remarkably, this first display of our ensemble, only 20 hours after our first notes played together, was more than presentable, and gave both players and conductors great encouragement for the week ahead. That evening, we all attended the concert by Amsterdam Loeki Stardust Quartet as part of the GMRW, which was naturally stimulating and uplifting. Sectional work began in earnest on the Sunday - Sops/Descants with Helen, Trebles/Tenors with Dennis/Colin/Colin or Ross later on, Basses (and Greats some time) with Marion, and Contras (and Greats) with David.

On the Sunday afternoon, many players had time off for O/A-level revision, many attended the Heart of England Recorder Orchestra (HERO) concert in Malvern to provide an example of listening to a recorder orchestra, which for most players was a new experience. For these trips to Malvern, and later for the Birmingham concert, coaches were booked to ferry the group safely together - these arrangements worked fairly well, except for one slow bus being delayed severely.

Most days I led a free 15-minute session to give conducting tips to any interested - usually we had over 25 of the students gathered to practise moving their arms and making gestures in musical ways! On the Tuesday evening we enjoyed several students conducting sections of the pieces, and a very merry end to this section to the course allowed the following concert day to begin with great expectations.

Visitors on the course were very welcome, and in particular Andrew Short, who took many photos and videoed one of the conducting sessions and some of the rehearsals - good for reference; a professional quality necessary for duplication to show generally to branches would have cost over £3,000 and so this had to be cut from the budget. Also, Helen and David Beare, who have taken on marketing and organisation since the event with great enthusiasm and skill, were avidly attendant at the first public playing and helped beforehand to attract and involve several sponsors.

Recreation at school included a small snooker table, television, swimming in the supervised pool, and organised games by Jules. Most days included some 8 hours of rehearsal either in sectional or full ensemble in 5 sessions of the day. The solo cellist arrived on Tuesday afternoon for a preliminary run-through with half the players, whilst the other half, more advanced, ensemble played through John Hawkes' Geodesic with the composer present. The tuning, balance, blend and rhythmic ensemble of the group were building well, and excitement was high for the concert day. On the Wednesday morning, a group of nine players and I went to Worcester to play live on BBC Hereford and Worcester Radio - a short excerpt from Paul's Scarborough Fair was all we could squeeze into the slot and the studio, but it came over effectively and the interviewer was well impressed by the contra bass and the performance as a whole: back at school, there was apparently a great spirit of support and sense of the ensemble being as one in acknowledging their representatives.

Recording engineers had been engaged for the Wednesday concert at Birmingham Conservatoire, and for a final Thursday morning session back at the school, a plan designed to ensure that we had good recordings of all the material to produce the eventual CD. The concert went well, with a large audience of over 250, and some of the playing had genuine fervour, control, atmosphere and magic. Some was perhaps a little overawed, and tuning and ensemble suffered slightly but only occasionally. Some fine photographs were taken by Jules' dad. On the Thursday morning, despite the exertions of the previous night (and a high-spirited, enthusiastic party!), the concentration and quality of playing for the recording session were excellent, and by choosing not to re-do my Sinfonia and Geodesic (I felt it would be impossible to recreate the fine sense of occasion and atmosphere, even though there were matters we could have improved) and Phil the Fluter, we took the pressure off the students so we could more leisurely tackle the remaining works, which benefited from this attention.

Sad farewells, hopes for another course, and great friendships forged - it was a busy day wrapping up. Then some weeks of listening to the recordings, making decisions, matching photos and text, some of this done by essential email, led to the production and distribution of a very good CD which visually and aurally provides information, delight and status to NYRO. This has now been circulated to conductors of orchestras in the UK and abroad, and reaction has been, so far, very supportive, encouraging and impressed. Some 170 have already been sold to or through the players themselves.

An enormous amount of goodwill, hard work and commitment was given and shared by many people to make this event happen - thanks are due to everyone for their various and essential contributions.

For the future, if the Committee wishes the project to develop (and I feel sure that the obvious musical and national benefits for the SRP itself as well as for the concept of NYRO will ensure they will), I am more than happy to be involved once more, and would like to propose the following:

an annual course and concert (late July/early August - for 2003, second week August looks best);

Helen and David Beare to continue their work in admin. and sponsorship;

Naomi Winterburn to be musical assistant to myself in administrating auditions and course requirements;

for 2003 - possibly a south-eastern venue for the course and a London college concert hall for the performance;

record the concert and end the course that night, with parents collecting players after performance;

auditions all live - as with all other national ensembles, in 8 venues, using a team of four sectional tutors to assist in the

process (possible exceptions - those on Ireland, Isle of Man, Channel or Scottish islands) - to take place between March and April;

application forms and details to be circulated in mid-November, with deadline of mid-March;

circulation through magazines, music press, colleges, schools, SRP/ERTA, etc. but increased in number over 2002.

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