

# A Semi-Brief History of the *Winds of Southern Wisconsin*

by David Grindrod, President

The *Winds of Southern Wisconsin* was organized in late 1990 or early 1991 as a local chapter of the American Recorder Society (ARS). A rummage through a *Winds* historical archives shows that early chapter officers kept meticulous notes of membership and board meetings, and published a monthly (!!!) chapter newsletter. However, WSW's earliest activities may be lost in the mists of time and human memory: the first written records in our collection begin with August 1991 board minutes and an October '91 newsletter noting the successful completion of the chapter's first year.

The *Winds* documents file also contains our amended chapter bylaws of December 1991 (still in effect, I believe). This document lists the purposes of WSW, in addition to those of ARS, as creating financial resources to bring in noted workshop teachers and performers; learning and accessing a larger body of music through a library and/or shared resources; and providing a meeting place for players looking for others to form consorts. Members gathered once a month, on a Sunday afternoon, for a brief business meeting, a presentation, talk or performance on some aspect of playing recorder, flute, or early music, and some large group playing. It is also interesting to see in notes of one of the first *Winds* board meetings that the group was struggling to find a way to provide better opportunities for beginning players to develop their skills.

Other streams of early music/ recorder activities going on at the time also flowed into, touched or helped shape the growth of the *Winds*. Professional flute and recorder maker and performer Tom Boehm was leading a monthly *Baroque Musicale* playing session at the Atwood Avenue Neighborhood Center. This group of mostly recorder and baroque flute players had a very eclectic and fluctuating membership, welcoming in the occasional early or modern string player, harmonica, or tin whistle. However, Tom and the group did attempt to go beyond sight-reading, to polish pieces for occasional public performances.

A number of *Winds* members had also participated in other groups. These included the Madison Recorder Society (an earlier ARS chapter led by Irmgard Bittar), the UW-Madison Collegium Musicum, the *Encore* performance ensemble, and the annual early music festival at Milton College, which moved to UW-Whitewater after Milton closed. Long time *Winds* members Tim and Tinney Heath also hosted a monthly Double Reed Night, which focused on playing early music on "loud buzzy things" (i.e. shawms and crumhorns), but the group would resort to playing recorders after their double reed embouchures were exhausted.

Early in the 1993-94 season, then-*Winds* president Catherine Gilbertson and some other members decided to organize a weekly Monday night recorder playing session to rotate among members' homes, with host providing a selection of music and perhaps some background exploration of the selections. I think we saw this group as meeting or reconciling two possibly contradictory aims: to help less-experienced players develop their skills through smaller group playing, and perhaps coaching, with the more experienced, and, on the other hand, to move to a higher level of musical understanding and performance than was possible in monthly large-group playing.

The Monday night group was quite successful from the beginning, with about 8 regular members. Sometime during that year, perhaps based in part on the success of this group, Tom Boehm conceived the idea of starting a recorder

orchestra. Tom argued that this type of orchestra, using four or more standard recorder voices, was an established performance tradition in European music, particularly in Germany. He proposed accepting any players of recorder and compatible instruments (not tin whistles or harmonicas) who would commit to regular weekly rehearsals and polishing pieces for eventual high-quality public performances. Since adding another night to the weekly and monthly round seemed impractical, Tom asked the Monday night group if they would consider folding themselves into the orchestra, and we happily agreed to the exciting prospect of a regular performance group.

In short order this new orchestra was named the "Aeolian Choir" (in honor of the Greek god of the winds), and began a wonderful, sometimes frustrating, sometimes stressful three years of quite intensive rehearsals and development of repertoire ranging from renaissance polyphony to Hindemith and modern-era composers. Tom soon found the administrative management of the group, including collection of dues, management of parts and scores, arrangement of practice and performance space, publicity, etc., to be an overwhelming burden, and asked WSW to take over this aspect, thus folding the Aeolian Choir into an official *Winds* activity.

I think it's fair to say that the Aeolian Choir never quite lived up to the performance expectations of Tom and at least some of the members. At the same time, it clearly provided a taste of the joys of studying and polishing music, and greatly raised our standards of ensemble playing. But after three years, Tom and the *Winds* board had grown tired of the demands. Tom announced that he would not continue as director of the Choir the following year, and most of the original board decided not to run for re-election.

Some of the bewildered *Winds* and Choir survivors had to take the reins if we were to continue getting our fix of coached ensemble performance. Eventually, four of us, myself, Gary Rosenshield, and former members Mary Carter and Jim Anderson agreed to be nominated to the new board for the coming year. Ginny Dodson stayed on from the old board as treasurer. Mary Nason soon replaced Mary Carter as program chairman, and Beverly Inman took over as treasurer when Ginny stepped down the following year. The new board continued the existing chapter activities, with monthly meetings for business, programs and large group playing, but attendance was dropping; our main concern was how to reinvigorate and maintain the coached ensemble. We didn't know into whose hands we wanted to entrust our group, or even whether anyone would be willing to take up this demanding task. In desperation, we hit upon the compromise idea of trying out different leaders.

We also decided to try two different meeting formats. The first was to continue our Monday evening coached sessions, for which Louise Austin agreed to be our first temporary director. This series was to meet for eight rehearsals, followed by a public performance of a range of renaissance to baroque and modern music. The second format would be an extended one-day weekend workshop, in which I think we hoped to interest Tom to make a no-strings-attached reappearance. (He did do a couple of these, and also eventually led one more Monday-night session, on music of the 30-Years War, before hanging up his musical spurs completely to focus on making archery bows.) We also saw the one-day session as a way that we could try out potential new directors with whose work we were less familiar. The

one-day and multiple Monday night coached workshop formats both proved popular with members and have become the basic structure of our current Winds activities. Meanwhile, with declining participation in the Sunday afternoon meetings, and the need for continuing significant effort by board members in locating and recruiting potential workshop leaders and planning workshops, we decided after a year or so to drop the monthly meetings and focus solely on workshops.

### **Workshop leaders and topics**

Although we seem to get comfortable with a stable routine with a small round of directors, over the years we've had quite a variety of leaders and themes. Tom Boehm liked to focus in detail on the historical and social background underlying music of a particular period. Tim and Tinney Heath presented several workshops on understanding early renaissance music theory and reading its notation, and how these ideas should inform early music performance. Louise Austin brought a bit more emphasis on recorder playing technique and practice, and shared her broad knowledge of recorder repertoire, covering dance music, unusual eastern European baroque, and an intimate familiarity with 20<sup>th</sup> century jazz, and compositions and arrangements specifically for recorders. Lisette Kielson also brought, from her experience as a professional recorder performer and teacher, an emphasis on ensemble performance skills and an extremely broad repertoire ranging from renaissance chromaticism, ornamentation and division techniques through music of Purcell, Vivaldi, Bach, and Handel, among many others. Weekend workshop leaders have included David Echelard on early French polyphony and including voice and vocal technique in recorder performance; Clea Galhano on ensemble and individual technique, Baroque and renaissance performance, and Brazilian jazz/ folk music; Lisette (this was how she and the Winds first explored our partnership many years ago); and David Hogan Smith, on playing Renaissance Wind Band repertoire based on interpreting early manuscripts. This last workshop was a three-day affair also incorporating a Friday night concert (with Tom B., Tim and Tinney) and a Sunday crumhorn workshop.

### **Taking stock**

It is interesting to reflect on how years of Winds activities have met or deviated from the group's original objectives. We have definitely built a resource to provide workshops and bring in instructors, and have given people a place to play and learn. We have built up a repertoire, and gotten to know a great deal of the recorder music that's out there. We don't do much with smaller consorts and performing groups, and still haven't really figured out what to do for instructing beginners. We have built up quite a collection of music, largely through Beverly sharing her vast collection, and from collecting music shared by various instructors. On the whole, I think we've built a vibrant society that is doing a good job of providing an outlet for early music performance. We could do more with developing consorts, if anyone has the time and interest to pursue this. Someone could develop a more organized catalog of music that we have available and have performed, if anyone is of a mind to do this.

The passing of the monthly meeting, in favor of more coached playing, seems the most significant change in our organization. This has both pros and cons. I think many people prefer more playing and less talking. On the other hand, this has meant the loss of a venue for individuals or small groups to perform, and for talks and demonstrations. I think it's up to the members to decide if such a venue is

still wanted. More importantly, the end of monthly meetings may have led to reduced and less frequent input from the membership into the steering of the organization.

In earlier years, and as specified by the bylaws, members would vote each spring on members of the board for the coming year. In practice, the problem has always been finding enough people willing to serve, rather than having to choose among competing candidates. The board has had to resort to identifying, cornering, persuading, cajoling, and interning likely prospects in order to at least partially replace itself over time. In addition to those mentioned earlier, Margaret Asquith and Pat Desnoyer, and current board members Obie Oberst and Randy Wiggins have contributed time and hard work.

Recently the board conducted a survey of members, to try to assess how the current program was meeting members' needs, and how it could be improved. A membership meeting planned that will take up part of a Monday night group playing session in December will be another tool for reincorporating member participation into Winds planning. We now have a large, vigorous, engaged and enthusiastic membership, and I believe the time is right for building that membership into our organizational structure to keep the Winds vital for a long time to come.

