



Victorian Recorders before the Guild

Geoff Hughes

'As used in Victorian Schools' said the display of a Schott plastic recorder and Priestley & Fowler Part 1. Having just given up my Engineering course and enrolled in the Melbourne Teachers' College, I had to get onto this! The next year, 1949, as a Student Teacher at Murrumbena, I was able to use my recorder to teach singing by rote (my singing would have resulted in all the songs sounding the same).

I had seen recorders before: about 1943, two sisters at Dandenong High School played theirs in the school orchestra. These were wooden ones they had brought from overseas. I was always intrigued by the way they carefully pulled them apart and dried them out.

During my teacher training, I met Frank Higgins at Malvern Central School (Spring Rd), and during my college year (1950), sat in on the recorder band practices Frank and Pat Ryan held in the Junior School there (the venue for the 1991 July Weekend of Music). Sometimes I took the lesson myself, so I had a bit of semi-official training. The instruments used were plastic Schotts. Edgar Hunt had designed them with fairly wide voicing, as the overtones of more finely voiced reedier-sounding ones sounded too harsh en masse. I forget what they were using for trebles - but they were playing trios for two descants and treble. I heard this group playing at the school's Speech Night, and I know they took part in the VSSBA Contests at the Prahran Town Hall. I think Pat told me there were five recorder bands taking part, but Dingley is the only other name I can remember.

1951 found me at Gormandale East State School (south of Traralgon). When the idea of a local clergyman for a Youth Club recorder group fell through, the instruments and tutors were given to the school. Ten years later, I was told by a mum I met that Billy was still playing his recorder.

At the beginning of Term 2 in 1952, I took up my first permanent appointment - at Archie's Creek near Wonthaggi. Half the school learnt to play; that is, there were eight players. The parents appreciated 'a bit of music' at school functions. Thirty or so years later, at a 'back-to', a middle-aged cockie introduced me to his wife as 'the bloke who taught me to play the recorder,' to which his wife responded, 'And he's still playing it!' (This was the school at which, after a school council meeting, it was announced that there was to be a 'Galah Ball'.)

The next bout of recorder teaching was at Bunyip, beginning in 1954. Here there were about sixteen players using descant, treble and tenor recorders. The local churches soon realised the drawing power of the kids, and there were several people of whom it was said that they had only attended church for three functions: their christening, their wedding and to hear their child play. When the time came for us to attend our first VSSBA competitions, one of the cow-cookies lent me his cattle truck, and with the band loaded in the rear, off we set for the Big Smoke. Several years later, one girl in this group took up clarinet and sax, and formed a group with a pianist and a drummer - two ex-Archies Creek recorder players!

As I was asked to play at the odd local function, I decided to take my playing more seriously, and imported from England a consort of Dolmetsch recorders. These boxwood instruments duly arrived, but the descant and treble were stolen (and I had to keep up the payments!). The tenor was not very good, so I replaced the three with rosewood instruments in 1956.

At home in Moorabbin, I was asked to start a recorder group in the church youth group. There were only two takers, one being sixteen year old Fred Morgan. With Fred on descant,



Children from Essex Heights Primary School with Geoff Hughes (far left) in rehearsal with John Hopkins conducting the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in a performance of Nigel Butterley's Meditations of Thomas Traherne.

myself leading on treble, brother David on tenor and Vern Cresswell on bass, we formed 'The Susato Recorder Consort', firstly playing at church functions, then at more public engagements. The late Dr A E Floyd took an interest in us, and it was largely through him that we had our first ABC recital. At an afternoon of music he organised, I announced a composer as being 'Pur-sell', to be publicly corrected by Dr Floyd, who told us that he had been in the choir at the church where Purcell had officiated, and the tradition was 'Pur-sill'. Later, with a change of personnel, mostly living and/or working in Waverley schools, we changed our name to 'The Waverley Recorder Consort', which required fewer explanations and corrections.

Fortunately, the ABC jobs were pretaped. We found it quite hard to concentrate when we could see the technicians in the booth beating time with amber-coloured glasses. Once, the associated artists were the University Choral Society. The best the announcer, swaying ('Where there's a swill, there's a sway') in front

of the microphone, could manage, after a couple of tries, was "The Univershal Choral Shoshiety'. This was done with the normal BBC-type plum in the mouth - albeit a pickled plum.

A broadcast to celebrate Shakespeare's birthday involved us, a singer, a viol, and a harpsichord. To save the cost of transporting and tuning this rare and valuable instrument, it had been decided to install the recording gear in the player's kitchen, whilst we performed in the lounge room. At the appropriate juncture, a hand would appear through the door, and the performer was away. The resident dogs, listening outside the window, felt impelled to add their voices (without remuneration) to those of the recorders. The recital concluded with an account of how Shakespeare came to die on his birthday after falling into the ditch on his way home from the inn. 'The Waverley Recorder Consort will conclude this recital with *Watkin's Ale*'.

Another program with the Uni... Choral Sh.. mob also included a prominent pianist/

harpsichordist. There was a fear that certain uncouth members of the consort would disgrace the others by their unbecoming behaviour; we had to try to maintain the required decorum. Whilst the choir was singing unaccompanied, the harpsichordist suddenly whipped out a thermos and mug and poured himself some tomato soup. Gulp! He was required to accompany! Down went the hot mug onto the expensive harpsichord, down plonked the player onto the seat. 'Hhhwhoooooot!' went the cushion into the nearby microphone. This performance was all done with a style we could not possibly have matched!

One performance, in the Melbourne Town Hall, the venue for all the best concerts, was with a certain suburban choir, to comprise pieces all composed by Mr Anon. We were described in a newspaper column as a 'Twitter' of recorders. We thought our recorders would not be heard, but it was a beautiful feeling to hear them echoing around the hall. Another performance was in the inaugural concert of the Melbourne Mandolin Orchestra.

It was through my association with the ABC that my pupils at Essex Heights Primary School (where I taught from 1964 to 1978) came to play as part of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. The piece was Nigel Butterley's (better known by the kids as Butterfly) *Meditations of Thomas Traherne*. This called for twenty-two descant recorders. (Can you imagine the effect of twenty-two parts within the compass of one and a half octaves?) The 1969 engagement was for two Red Series concerts, under visiting Russian conductor, Peter Eros. My nagging about professional rehearsal discipline was destroyed when we attended the first rehearsal - the basses eating peanuts from brown paper bags, various people reading the Herald during rests, jokes and riddles being called out from section to section 'The bass clarinet is at a wedding' 'The bassoon is sick' We played the piece again in 1975 for the Moomba Proms concert, with the composer present.

A production of Britten's *Noyes Fludde* found us as the recorder section of the Children's Orchestra, with Don Cowell singing the voice of God. Rehearsals were in various loca-



A happy coincidence - The Recorder's designer, Nola Ryan, talking to John Hopkins at the Butterley rehearsal whilst working for the Ministry of Education's Music Branch.

tions, with Don always finding some appropriate elevated location to sing from. Just as he was walking to one fresh venue, a child mused 'I wonder where God will be today?' Another, sighting Don, gasped 'Talk of the Devil!'

Those times in the sixties and seventies at Essex Heights Primary School were very exciting and rewarding. Others associated with the school later became members of the Guild. One was a teacher, Miss Gwen Rathjens (later Gwen Rodgers) our founder, and another was a pupil, Chris Burgess.

A good person to finish with is the person at the start.

It must have been as a result of the enthusiasm and skill of Frank Higgins that the recorder movement in Victoria got going so strongly. He was a skilled teacher, his ability to get an idea across being uncanny. During a visit to Bunyip, as Frank took my band through *Lovely Evening*, the whole sound of the group changed, and he left the kids entranced: 'Sir, I don't know how he did it, but Mr Higgins made me play better!'

Many adults learnt to play through his Council of Adult Education classes. I can still remember the pleasure and development David, Vern, Fred and I derived from these weekly classes.