



Concord Chamber Orchestra - A Grand History 1976-1985

Written by its founder, John Parfrey

The Concord Chamber Orchestra was founded in 1975 to provide performances of classical music for the enjoyment of area audiences, to offer talented area musicians performance opportunities and, through its annual concerto competition, to give promising young musicians a venue in which to perform. Its membership consists of volunteer adult players from various professions and age groups. In 1993, the orchestra made its home the community of Wauwatosa where it regularly performs.

Looking back

There are eight boxes in the garage of our home. Most of the contents in those boxes chronicle nine years of my professional music career in Milwaukee. Much of what is found there are all of the posters, programs, concert recordings, videotapes and reviews from the first nine seasons of the Concord Chamber Orchestra, a group which I'm proud to have started back in 1976.

Namewise, it wasn't always called "Concord". At the beginning it was simply called "Orchestra" as the nameless pit band for two local college productions; one a musical, the other an opera. Then, for seven seasons, it went under the moniker of "The Society of Music Chamber Orchestra." (For purposes of brevity in this accounting, we will call it SMCO from here on.)

Though this first name of the group was rather long and unwieldy, it successfully captured its *raison d'être*: a society of music. By marrying these two words into a concept, the character of the group began to emerge: a mixture of serious adult amateur musicians (some of them music teachers), high school and college students, and freelance professionals, all of whom loved the experience of making music in a low-pressure congenial atmosphere.

1976-1977 - The Early Days

Concord had its humble beginnings in the basement of Albrecht Hall on the old campus of Concordia College in the spring of 1975.

I was in my second year on the music faculty at Concordia. I had always wanted to conduct, and this position offered ample opportunities to do that. I took over leadership of a singing group and had been charged with starting a college band. In addition I was also hired to lead the college musical theater productions. And it was from these musicals that Concord found its genesis. In the spring of 1976, the school had mounted a production of *Hello Dolly*. It was an enjoyable production for many reasons, not the least of which was that a certain *esprit* that began in the orchestra pit.

Lacking a strong instrumental music program, the college always hired an orchestra for its musicals. These groups always had good musicians, many of them veterans of many seasons at the Melody Top Theater where they were able to learn these scores inside out. With talented musicians like these, it was easy to move past the notes directly to making good music.

In the midst of this good experience, the string section had formed its own special set of friendships. This connection was so strong that when the production closed there was a real desire among these string players to keep the experience going somehow. That desire was soon to find an outlet.

Within days of the show's closing, Gene Hill, the college's voice teacher, approached me about forming a small orchestra for his production of Mozart's opera, *Bastien und Bastienne*. With a bunch of new phone numbers in my little black book, I hastily called my "Dolly" orchestra strings, and before we knew it, we were making music again.

Though it was a small production - just two performances - it was all we needed to keep things going.

At first it was just a reading group. Through the rest of the spring of 1976 and into the summer, we would gather once a week to read through scores. As time went by we acquired some new musicians. A bassist from UWM (Bruce Guetzkow) joined us. A violinist who studied with MSO's Eriks Klavins, who taught his private students at the college during that time. And other friends of the original members showed up along the way until our original four or five musicians had burgeoned out to around fifteen.

Throughout the summer I was amazed and excited at the level of music we were beginning to make, so one fateful evening in July I asked the group if they'd like to do a public performance. After some discussion, all agreed on an October (1976) date. (I knew that for a significant number of these people that would be end of the road but I hoped that enough of a nucleus would be left to keep the group going on a permanent basis.)

At that first (October 8, 1976) concert we performed Holst's *St. Paul Suite*, Hindemith's *Acht Stucke*, Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No.3* and arias from Gluck's *Orfeo* with Gene Hill (Countertenor), our first soloist. The musicians that night included 1st Violins, Margaret Leach (Concertmaster), Mary Locke, Mary Roseberry; 2nd Violins, Carol Kincaid, John Kramer, Lynn Parrish, Donna Pelikan; Violas, Ken Wollberg, Mary Norquist, Carol Rognsvoog; Celli, Nancy Nischik, Margaret Norquist, Wally Mennicke; String Bass, Bruce Guetzkow, and Harpsichordist Vera Pawlack

Before the concert, the excitement and tension was palpable. It only became more so when I peered out at the audience from backstage and spotted Lawrence B. Johnson, the rather hard-to-please music critic from the Milwaukee Sentinel!

In the end, the energy came out at just the right levels as we turned in a lively, musical and really enjoyable first concert. Listening to the tape from that first evening confirms my recollection of what a pleasant and exciting beginning that was!

Sentinel Critic Johnson agreed and proclaimed in glowing terms that an exciting new ensemble had been born in Milwaukee that night.

There would be a major rebuilding of the group after that first concert. Most had other commitments after that point. But the momentum was started, and by the next spring we had another fine group ready to do a full house concert of Bach and Handel (with Eriks Klavins playing Bach's A Minor concerto and organist Hugo Gehrke performing Handel's 4th Organ Concerto).

In addition to the spring concert our first season was rounded out with a concert which included a fully staged production of Menotti's opera "The Telephone".

And from there it went.

1977-1982 - Growth & Expansion

The next several seasons saw the group move its performances off the Concordia campus. Those first concerts were in Concordia's old chapel, a room with over-live acoustics and tiny performing space. So as the orchestra's repertoire expanded to include Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms, there was a need for more physical and acoustic space.

Since we operated on a zero budget, we were limited to spaces willing to let us in for little or no cost. Fortunately, through Concordia, we had a built-in Lutheran network which provided entrée into some of the most interesting performing spaces in the city, including old Trinity Lutheran on Wells St, Sherman Park Lutheran in Wauwatosa, and Redeemer on Wisconsin Avenue among others.

When the budget went from nothing to not-too-much (!), the orchestra began to stage many of its performances at the War Memorial Art Center's great hall. With the War Memorial's added performance space and somewhat better acoustics the group could expand both its membership and repertoire. That still didn't keep us from wandering around the city with a devoted audience, experimenting with a wide variety of performing venues. When else could you hear Helen Ceci sing Bach's Cantata #51 in a converted bowling alley (Century Hall), Walton's Façade at Villa Terrace (complete with tea and scones), or Mozart's Turkish Concerto at the (newly restored) Grain Exchange room?

The 1977-82 seasons saw a maturing begin to take place. Some ventures were more successful than others, but throughout this period a few important things began to happen. First, membership retention - always a challenge for any community group - began to solidify. A small solid core of musicians which had stayed from concert to concert, began to increase. And along with this growth, the replacing musicians were generally more skilled than those whose places they took.

This growth also attracted the attention of Milwaukee's professional music community. Members of the Milwaukee Symphony, and faculty from the Wisconsin College-Conservatory and USM Music Department all took an active interest in the group, performing as soloists (always for free), sending their students to perform in and in front of the group, and - on many occasions -

performing as members of the orchestra themselves. The fiendishly difficult horn parts of Haydn's Hornsignal Symphony (#31) would have made that work out of our range without UWM's horn instructor Barry Benjamin and a trio of his best students there to scale the heights of those parts, and (Fine Arts Quartet cellist) Wolfgang Laufer to play the soaring cello solos. Wayne Cook and Pat Badger took turns at making the virtuoso trumpet part of Bach's 2nd Brandenburg Concerto sound like effortlessly joyful music-making. (Barry Benjamin even substituted for Wayne at a rehearsal one week, flawlessly playing the clarino trumpet part on a French horn! Weeks of begging couldn't coax him to ever attempt it in public, though.) Cellist Stephen Doane (New Arts Trio) spent hours at my home carefully marking all the bowings into the score of the Haydn C Major Concerto for his performances later that fall. Wolfgang Laufer perform a Stamitz concerto and then took the stage with his brilliant young son, Daniel (now Associate Principal Cellist of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra) in his debut to perform a Vivaldi concerto for two cellos.

The involvement of these local personalities would never have happened without a solid core of fine, dedicated musicians who did far more than just show up. After all, in the life of any group, amateur or professional, music needs to be bowed and marked, posters needed to be folded, stapled and mailed, chairs needed setting up, equipment needed to be moved, program notes need to be written, tickets need to be sold, and - through this whole process - financial support is needed to pay the bills. (In those days, the College would occasionally advance money, but it always needed to be repaid.)

As the group grew in number and in its reach, there was a need to identify individual sources of financial support. Surely, many fine soloists waiving their fees formed the first important body contributions. Then direct financial support came from some philanthropists from within the orchestra, and even some from relatives of orchestra musicians. Eventually, support would begin to come from foundation grants (Goethe House, Lutheran Brotherhood).

1982-1984 - The Vision Widens

During this time The Society of Music Chamber Orchestra became the Concord Chamber Orchestra. In a contest amongst members of the orchestra and board, Ray Shekoski, our concertmaster at the time, came up with the winning entry.

It soon became apparent that as Concord grew in stature and scope, there was a great need for governance (a board of directors) to provide leadership and to pursue formal incorporation.

The original members of the first Concord Board of Directors included David K. Nelson, President, Audrey Baird, Honorary Chairperson, Richard Zanoni, Treasurer, David Berger, College Representative, Carolyn Ceronnes, General Manager, Sal Ceraso, Gary Ciepluch, James Dean, Kathy Gellert, Betty James, Dorothey & Robert Keune, Norma Martz, Rene Miller, Lynne Parrish, Dorothy Pralle and Ann Siverling.

[Note: I am convinced that the board's creation and its subsequent firm leadership did more than anything else to assure a continued future for the orchestra.]

No sooner did the board convene than did we engage the services of Carolyn Cerrones as general manager. She brought with her a seemingly impossible and over-the-top vision of matching this fine community orchestra with world-class artists. When the board adopted her plan we soon found ourselves sharing the stage with the likes of pianists Lukas Foss, Leonard Pennario and violinist Charles Treger in addition to attracting top artists from the local scene. Also, as part of this new direction, we began performing in the best venues the city then had to offer, including the newly refurbished Pabst Theater and Vogel Hall across the street.

Those heady days had us with Foss performing Bach (D Minor Concerto), Pennario performing Chopin (E Minor Concerto) and Treger performing the Beethoven D Major. The orchestra during that time performed symphonies by Mozart (36th), Vaughan-Williams' (5th), Schubert (5th & 9th), Suites by Bach (3 & 4), Walton's Façade, Mozart & Dvorak Wind Serenades and much more.

All of this brought artistic and fiscal challenges that had never before been imagined. However the (at the time) enormous cost of this venture was entirely met. And while this bold experiment didn't prove to be a lasting part of its legacy, the orchestra grew from it immeasurably both musically and administratively.

My days at Concordia came to an end at the end of the 1983-84 season. I had accepted a teaching post in California and so, along with Concordia, I had to say farewell to Concord.

The Success Builders

While a dedicated board, committed musicians, and lots of external support were all key components for breathing life into SMCO in those years, there are times when the ultimate success of a venture like this rested on certain individuals. From my vantage point Concord had two people whose individual generosity, vision and hard work did more than anything else to secure a future for SMCO/Concord. Those people were David Nelson and Ann Siverling.

Violinist David Nelson, an attorney for Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, brought to the organization a unique combination of musical knowledge and skills and administrative acumen. Musically, David was the rudder that guided many of my repertoire choices, since his orchestral experience as a serious non-professional had exposed him to a wide array of music. He knew the pieces that could send an amateur string section crashing into the rocks and helped me avoid them. Administratively, he was the first person I thought of in naming our first board of directors. And, not surprisingly, he was the board's unanimous choice to lead the orchestra forward as its first president. It also has to be said that his personal generosity kept the orchestra financially afloat at some very critical times. And - at other times - that same generosity enabled us to do some things which otherwise might never have been possible.

Ann Siverling, who would eventually become an arts administrator for several of Milwaukee's most successful arts groups, found what I think was probably her first outlet in that direction with Concord. For four years, Ann devoted heart and soul, day and night, raising thousands of dollars through personal fund-raising and selling hundreds of tickets to concerts. Her artistic skills provided us with beautiful posters and program covers. To raise funds on one occasion, she even created, had printed and then individually hand-illuminated holiday greeting cards for the

group to sell. And this was all at her expense so that all the proceeds would flow to the orchestra. She even ferried musicians without transportation to and from rehearsals. It's also a fair bet that she probably wore out two automobiles running around the city getting things done for us. She was an absolute dynamo. Simply put, the debt Concord and I owe to Ann can never be repaid.

Looking back on it all now, I see the size or importance of my own contribution in lesser and lesser terms as I have come to realize how much the success of a venture like the Concord Chamber Orchestra really depends on the willingness of many people at many levels to contribute thousands of hours of their time toward a common goal. If I played any kind of role in the group's early successes it may have been because I saw a need in the community, added equal parts of vision and sweat-equity to fill the need, tossing into the mix a lot of encouragement along with my own commitment to be there to see it through, come what may.

But I will always know that there were many times I couldn't have gone on without the close friendships and associations I had with many people who shared the same dreams I had for Concord. In addition to all the names mentioned above I think of (in no particular order) Gail Hempel Nelson, Ken Wollberg, Dick Zanoni, Bruce Guetzkow, James Dean, Lynn Parrish, Kelly Callahan, Dottie Pralle, Lori Odermann, Juanita Schreck, Mary Stuckert, Carol Shiraga, Carole White, Arthur Norris, Pat Badger, Pat Backus, Dick Zanoni, Audrey Baird, Rene Miller, and Frank Hertzberg. (My apologies to any others whose names haven't come to mind in this quick recounting.)

I must confess a certain pride in the role I played in helping create an organization which still exists after twenty-five years. Its longevity and continued strength is ample evidence of the mission it continues to fulfill in the life of Milwaukee's music community. Under the leadership of its brilliant leader, Janet Millard, its future surely seems secure.