

THE RECORDER ORCHESTRA NEUKÖLLN
(DAS BLOCKFLÖTENORCHESTER NEUKÖLLN)

Its History and Future Plans

(From the commemorative publication for its 50th anniversary in 1997)



The recorder, having gone out of fashion at the beginning of the Viennese classical period (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven), was revived only at the turn of this century – starting in England. Carl Dolmetsch, whose father Arnold (1858 – 1940) was one of the first to reintroduce historical performances with his reproduced spinets and harpsichords, was instrumental in this revival. From 1910 on, Arnold Dolmetsch also built recorders. The family moved to Haslemere/England in 1914. Carl - the youngest son, born in France in 1911 – followed in his father's footsteps and became an accomplished flautist who helped initiate the famous annual "Haslemere Festival of Early Music" in 1925.

In Germany, this development began with Peter Harlan who built recorders from 1920 on. However, this instrument had to make a big "detour via Kindergarten and public school" on its way to respectability, as Hindemith put it. At first, popular "Spielmusik" of a modest degree of difficulty was written either solely for the recorder family or for recorders combined with Orff instruments. Later, important new impulses came from accomplished composers like H. Badings, B. Britten, W. Fortner, P. Hindemith, E. Krenek and Karl Marx.

In the thirties, first German attempts were made at choral recorder performances under the direction of Ferdinand Enke – in Germany’s very first “Volksmusikschule” in Berlin-Charlottenburg, founded by Fritz Jöde in 1924. This is where Rudolf Barthel received his first impulses on his way to becoming the founder of the Recorder Orchestra Neukölln. The “Musikschule Berlin-Süd” (today’s “Musikschule Neukölln”) was founded as the second of its kind. It was here that Barthel continued his work in the Neuköllner Erkstraße in February of 1946, after World War II. His first attempts were quite discouraging; and in his own words he was close to giving up, but at one rehearsal he finally succeeded in producing a clean intonation. The recorder orchestra was born, for in 1947 Barthel wrote his first original composition for the then still small ensemble. The “Neuköllner Suite” was the first piece composed for the whole recorder family – from the small soprano to the great bass.

This orchestra, in those days named “Blockflötenchor Neukölln”, swiftly improved in quality under Barthel’s strict regimen so that composers in Berlin became interested in writing for this ensemble. By 1963, its membership had grown to a total of 41 players (!). Subsequently, its name was changed to “Recorder Orchestra”. Its 15th anniversary was celebrated on March 16, 1963 – most likely six months late, according to various – though slightly differing - sources.

From 1953 to 1961, a total of five “recorder weeks” were organized every other year in the Musikschule Neukölln, now Emser Straße 137. These were seminars for recorder choirs under the direction of Rudolf Barthel, which were attended by music teachers from the Federal Republic of Germany as well as from foreign countries. Coworkers in those days were H. M. Haase, Hanna Haeusler, Linde Höffer-von Winterfeld, Käthe Kernbach, Anneliese Sack, Dr. Hildemarie Peter, Thea von Sparr, Ingrid Tietsch and Rüdiger Trantow. A total of 433 recorder players attended these seminars. Thirteen percent of them came from foreign countries, such as Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Denmark, Finland, France, Holland, Indonesia, Israel, Austria, the United States, Sweden, Yugoslavia and Switzerland. In the meantime, recorder ensembles have sprung up wherever there are music schools.

The players from Neukölln, in turn, traveled to England, Holland, France, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, Yugoslavia and Switzerland – in some cases several times. There were many favourable reviews from the press, e. g. the Aachener Volkszeitung of Oct. 15, 1962: *“The performance of the recorder choir of the Musikschule Berlin-Neukölln was sensational – if such a word is appropriate in connection with youth music. In the technical perfection of orchestral music, as demonstrated in the demanding and, for the most part, difficult movements by Max Baumann and Cesar Bresgen, the tradition of this school was upheld, which one generation ago had given rise to the much-discussed ‘recorder movement’.”*

The repertoire stretches mainly from the baroque to moderate modernism, including arrangements of classical works. The ensemble’s success has been shown in numerous radio recordings. Several composers were inspired to write original pieces for these instruments, among them Erwin Poletzky, Joachim Fritzen and Karl-Heinz Wischer, followed by Max Baumann, Herbert Baumann, Dietrich Erdmann, Harald Grenzmer,

Walter Rein, Anton Schöndlinger, Siegfried Borris, Fritz-Joachim Lintl, Konrad Wölki and Hans-Klaus Langer. It also has to be pointed out here that Barthel's compositions and arrangements are of extraordinary quality, as he was blessed with a strict and unmistakable sense of judgment.

Since 1978, Michael Kubik has been directing this orchestra. In addition to the familiar cooperation with string orchestras, soloists or choirs, he broke new ground for the Recorder Orchestra by initiating performances with plucking orchestra or guitar ensemble. One of the highlights, for example, was the première of the "Kleines Violinkonzert" by Fried Walter for violin, recorder ensemble and plucking orchestra in Feb. 1985 in the Great Concert Hall of "Haus des Rundfunks" with the soloist Cornelia Brandis. In the "Jubilee Concert for Michael Kubik" in Feb. 1993, recorder, string and plucking orchestras performed together for the first time. Back in the fifties, Barthel had created similar sounds by adding a scheitholz ensemble (a type of drone zither). As they say, there is nothing new under the sun.

Recently, the Recorder Orchestra has enthusiastically broadened its repertoire by exploring lighter music, such as the "Hungarian Dances" by Brahms, "Golliwogg's Cake-Walk" by Debussy or the "Spring Voices Waltz" by Johann Strauß.

The present budgetary constraints of the City of Berlin should not cause the demise of this sort of music or even the well-established music school itself. Too much has been achieved in the past. As a result, there is an historic responsibility to continue striving for and developing this unique task.

The Recorder Orchestra Neukölln is constantly looking for experienced players of all registers.

Founder of the recorder orchestra:
https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_Barthel

Berlin, im April 1997/revidiert 2009 © Michael Kubik

I am indebted to Roswitha and Claus Knoefel, Canada, for translating this special essay.