

And Oft When on my Couch I Lie - by Alec V Loretto

It might possibly have something to do with my advancing years. It probably has something to do with the many places I've visited and the thousands of people I've met in my recorder travels. It certainly has everything to do with the untimely death of Australian Recorder Maker Fred Morgan. Memories. And more memories. Lots and lots of them. Tumbling through my mind. As one gets older they seem to become more important. Or at least, they seem to occupy more time and space. And the more distant they are, the clearer they seem to become. Reading the tributes to Fred Morgan and his recorders, in a variety of publications, I was taken back more than twenty five years to the 1972 Flanders Festival when, for the first time, Morgan's instruments were heard by a wider international audience. At that time, in spite of filled order books, his name and his recorders were not widely known. In fact, among the exhibitors displaying recorders at the Exhibition of Instruments held during the 1972 Festival, only one showed copies of original recorders. For those who played the ebony Rottenburgh copies from the workshop of Belgian maker Andreas Glatt it was an unforgettable experience. The smoothness of their blowing and their rich full sound was a revelation of qualities that today we expect as a matter of course. My memories transported me back in time to the ancient Belgian town of Brugge. It was there amidst the excitement of Brugge's first ever International Recorder Competition that things started to happen. Until that year the Festival had been held irregularly and featured alternately harpsichord and organ with the competitions being centred upon those instruments. But now came the turn of the recorder! In later years, when considerable developments had taken place in early music performance, it was possible to include a much wider range of solo instruments - lute, early strings, cornetti, early brass and so on. But in 1972 it was the recorder which pretty well dominated the scene. Since then the Flanders Festival has become an annual affair and the recorder is still there today making its competition appearance every three years.

The first day of the competition was gripping. Mr Dewitte of Brugge welcomed everyone, and introduced the jury. It read like a Who's Who of the Early Music Scene - F.Bruggen, F.Conrad, S.Devos, R.Dyson, H.M.Linde, and W.Kuijken. They were seated near the front. They stood. They turned to face us. Was I alone in thinking that in the world outside they could pass as a rather motley collection of librarians? Or even civil servants? But here, within the walls of this musical arena they were giants of the early music stage. To warm applause they resumed their seats. Competitor number one was announced and appeared on stage. We listened to the first of more than forty performances of extracts from a Handel Sonata. This was followed by the first of more than forty performances of a Telemann Fantasia. One wondered how on earth the jury could listen to so many performances of the same work, let alone compare them and mark them! The actions of the jury - whispering something to a colleague, passing a note to another one, arm stretching, the amount of applause they offered to departing competitors - all of this and lots more was under intense scrutiny by audience and competitors alike. Anything that might give a helpful clue to competitors yet to appear was carefully noted. And as each competitor presented his/her own ornamented version of the set pieces, there were looks of despair from waiting competitors. Their meticulously prepared ornaments were too similar to what had just been heard. The jury, they guessed, would not be impressed by almost identical interpretations. And when competitors performed using copies of historic recorders made by Coolsma, Glatt, Marvin, Morgan or whoever, a stir ran through the audience. Why, they wondered, did these instruments sound so different? And how can I get my hands on one? Will those lucky enough to own such copies allow me to blow a few notes? Or even let me use it during my performance? Some did - in those days the competition

seemed to bring out the best in everyone. The world stage seemed bigger then, with more room for aspiring performers. And in those long gone times, the makers who strove to produce accurate copies were few and far between. It was the twentieth century factory instruments which dominated the recorder scene. Suggestions that good hand made copies were essential if we were to hear the music as it was heard by the composers, were often met by opposition from commercial producers. Articles advocating such instruments were often derided and even described as controversial! The windways are too small, critics claimed. Copies would have weak and even husky lower notes, they complained. The overall sound would be mean and pinched, they said. The recorder does not need smaller, undercut finger holes - modern woodwind instrument dispensed with these years ago! And so on. But the makers of good historic copies, including Morgan of course, persisted and were joined by others. Eventually, demands by players persuaded even the most reluctant commercial makers to yield and it wasn't long before highly acceptable factory copies after Bressan, Oberlender, Stanesby and others appeared in an increasing number of catalogues. Recorders to meet all tastes were now available. My memories of those early pioneering days are as if all those in-between-yesterdays never existed. The vitality and the energy of the 1970's recorder scene can hardly be imagined today. One had to be there.

As a final offering in Round One, each competitor performed an own choice piece. These varied considerably and were listened to with great interest. I can't honestly say that I remember every own choice piece but there is one I can vividly recall. It was presented by a young schoolgirl. She might have been fourteen years old. She played the set works from memory with an astonishing fluency. Her interpretations weren't profound. They reflected the innocence of her age. She triumphed, in spite of being accompanied by relatives who were neither musically nor technically in the same class. I remember being informed by a Frenchman sitting next to me that Thees is taking familiee loyaltee too far! We waited for her own choice. The programme informed us she would play To The Spring. Written by Danish composer H. Christiansen for sopranino recorder and harpsichord, we assumed it was composed especially for her. Again, playing from memory with a confidence possessed only by the young, she gave a dazzling display of a piece of music which didn't say a great deal but which gave her every opportunity to show an astonishing technique. From her fellow competitors, the applause was warm and generous. She modestly looked around the audience and jury, smiled, then walked off stage as if playing before such a critical audience was a normal everyday experience. There was no need to ask who her teacher was. Jury member Ferdinand Conrad leapt to his feet, clapped wildly and blew her kisses as she left the stage. I'm not sure, but I guess that was her most important performance so far. Brugge was a very important stepping stone for Michala Petri. As might be expected, many of those Brugge 1972 competitors are still well known today in the recorder world.

With the competitions over for the day, the summer evenings both before and after the concerts were spent wandering round the town or sitting in one of the many cafes enjoying a leisurely drink. It was possible to meet pretty well everybody who was anybody in one cafe or another - jury members, competitors, audience, exhibitors - the lot. Everything and everyone were so friendly and informal. The first round was completed and with all competitors processed the eight names were announced of those proceeding to the next round. The shrieks, smiles, tears, hugs, kisses, shrugs, stiff upper lips etc etc said it all. There was no need to ask. But one did wonder why so and so made it to the next round. Had there been wheeling and dealing among the jury? There often is. In spite of a not very convincing performance, I'll support your nomination if you support mine. And then, with the final round completed featuring just three players from the original forty plus, the jury's

verdict drew near. No court of law could ever have evidenced more tension. Ladies and gentlemen - the jury feels that the standard has not been high enough to award a first prize in the solo section. That's often an excuse for unresolved wheeling and dealing I thought! Second prize therefore is awarded to Conrad Steinmann of Switzerland. Hans Martin Linde, his teacher and a member of the jury responded hardly at all. Nor did teacher and jury member Frans Bruggen when the names were announced of those awarded the shared third prize - Marion Verbruggen and Ricardo Kanji from Holland and Brazil respectively. In the Consort Section the jury has decided to award second prize to the Huelgas-Ensemble of Belgium and Holland, fourth prize to the Cologne Recorder Ensemble of Germany, and highly commended to the Vienna Recorder Ensemble. And that was it. It was all over.

With farewells behind us we made our different ways homeward - jury, winners, losers, and audiences. Happily, many of those recorder friendships formed in 1972 endure to this day and oddly enough, as we said farewell, the results somehow seemed less important than the friendships. Of course, winning the competition is the dream of every contestant. Nobody enters thinking they are definitely going to lose. But somebody has to. Surprisingly, it sometimes happens that in many competitions, not only musical ones, it's the winners who quickly fade from view. Gladly, many of those 1972 competitors are still well known recorder identities. Sometimes, but not very often, the also rans make it to the very top. It happened to that confident fourteen year old schoolgirl. And I'm sure it happens today.

Memory. It's a funny old funny thing. Does anyone really understand it? Why it sometimes works? Or why it sometimes doesn't? The 1972 Flanders Festival comes back to me as if it happened this morning - the people, the sights, the sounds and the smells. But don't ask me what I did yesterday nor ask me what I had for breakfast today. I'd have to think very hard, and even then I'd probably get it wrong! Yes. Memories. Lots of them. Maybe too many - triggered by a variety of things - the sight of a thatched cottage; the sound of distant bells; the touch of an aged hand; the smell of hay and a nearby pine forest; the taste of salty sea air. Or, sadly in this case, the death of an eminent recorder maker.