

Paul Ashford and the West Coast Recorder Guild: A Short History

Martha Bixler's memoir ("A History of the ARS: A Memoir," excerpted in the March and May issues of AR) mentions the existence of groups in Seattle, WA, and San Francisco, CA, "early in the 1950s." Tantalizing notices of their activities appeared in the Newsletter of the American Recorder Society—this article expands on the history of these two closely related West Coast groups.

In the late 1940s and early '50s, a group of recorder players gathered—first in Seattle, then in San Francisco—around the person of Paul Ashford (1906–1952). A gifted performer, improviser, and composer, Ashford was the main force behind the founding of the Seattle Recorder Guild in 1948 and, two years later, the Baroque Players, a performing group of the San Francisco Recorder Guild. Both groups ceased to exist shortly after Ashford's death in 1952.

The history of these recorder groups cannot be separated from that of their leader. Not only did his compositions and arrangements provide practice and performance material, his charismatic personality inspired members during those few years of intense learning and activity.

Ashford grew up on the Washington coast and studied music at the University of Washington in the 1920s. He played clarinet and piano, and his talent for improvisation pointed him in the direction of becoming a silent movie pianist. That career was not to be, however: by the time he graduated from college, talking pictures had replaced silent ones.

The Depression years passed with occasional writing and playing gigs in Seattle. Ashford began to collect folk songs locally, and a long-term association developed with Ivar Haglund, a folk singer, owner of restaurants, and all-around Seattle personality.

At the beginning of World War II, Ashford did find steady work—as a welder—but continued to concentrate his efforts on playing, composing for a variety of instruments, notating folk songs, and building his collection of sheet music of regional songs. It was in the late 1930s that Ashford picked up the recorder, after

he found a set of Herwiga instruments in a Seattle music store. From then on he focused his musical talents more and more on the recorder ensemble.

In 1947, Ashford finally joined up with a few other recorder players. In the following year, he and Corlu Robinson (now Collier) organized the Seattle Recorder Guild (SRG), a group of six to ten people who practiced regularly.

Highlights of those years were weekly programs on radio station KISW. The SRG performed early and contemporary pieces, plus Ashford's arrangements, which were announced as "home-made versions of folk songs and dances."

During this time, SRG members established an umbrella organization—the West Coast Recorder Guild—with chapters in Seattle, Portland, OR (briefly), and San Francisco. This regional group played the same role in the West that the earliest American Recorder Society was playing in the East, though the West Coast Recorder Guild ended when its constituent chapters ceased to exist.

In late 1949, Ashford was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. To take advantage of an experimental treatment, but also seizing the opportunity to compose and perform in the Bay Area, Ashford

migrated to San Francisco in the summer of 1950. Seattle members Corlu Robinson and Donna Tallman soon followed, and the three (joined later by guitarist Freerk Mulders, also known as Guido Daunic) formed the Baroque Players, under the auspices of the recently formed San Francisco Recorder Guild.

The Baroque Players met every Sunday evening

by Eileen Flory

The author wishes to acknowledge as her main resource Corlu Collier, who possesses a rich collection of memories and printed records of earlier times. No outsider can do justice to what was an important experience for the musicians involved, but perhaps this article will fill in some details of an otherwise forgotten fragment of recorder history.

Eileen Flory plays viola da gamba in the Oregon Coast Recorder Society.

Paul Ashford, c.1951





in rented studio space and performed next door at Vesuvio Café (a San Francisco saloon still well-known as a vintage gathering place for *bon vivants* from all walks of life), as well as at the public library, the university, a hospital, etc. Listeners who tuned in to KPFA in Berkeley on Saturday evenings could hear the Baroque Players.

As in Seattle, most members kept their day jobs but were committed to music-making in their off hours. Musical talents were honed and matches were made in this group of musicians and friends.

In the summer of 1951, when he could no longer manage his disease, Ashford returned home to Seattle. He died there six months later at the age of 45. A core SRG

group had continued to meet while Ashford was in San Francisco and continued to meet briefly after he died. Both the Seattle Recorder Guild and the Baroque Players, however, officially dissolved soon after Ashford's death.

Paul Ashford's collection of early Pacific Northwest sheet music forms the nucleus of the Ashford Sheet Music Collection in the music library of the University of Washington, which now contains over 1,000 titles—pieces such as "I'd Start a Battle to Get Back to Seattle" and "On the Shores of Puget Sound."

As for compositions and arrangements for recorder, Ashford left two extensive, multi-movement works for recorder ensemble; many arrangements of early pieces (two of them published in 1951 by Hargail Music Press: a Haydn *Allegro* and an *Andante* by Christoph Willibald Gluck); and over 100 arrangements of traditional fiddle tunes, folk songs and Christmas carols—some for recorders only, and many for voice, recorders and guitar.

In a 1947 newspaper interview, Ashford asserted that his music was "of no particular consequence. It's been pleasant to write it and to play it; the family and some of our friends have enjoyed it. But it's unlikely that any of it would make me rich or famous even if it was published."

Be that as it may, some of Ashford's



Baroque Players at Grace West's Crossroads Theatre, May 18, 1952 (after Ashford had died): (l to r) Corlu Robinson and Donna Tallman, recorder, with Freerk Mulders, guitar.

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recorder compositions and arrangements are now being heard beyond his circle of family and friends. So far two major compositions and four fiddle tune arrangements have been published by Lost in Time Press, with a collection of Christmas carol arrangements forthcoming (see the music reviews section and advertisement in this issue of *AR*).

Although no direct descendants of the Seattle Recorder Guild or the Baroque Players exist today, one sure thread continues on the West Coast. The Oregon Coast Recorder Society is a 19-member ARS chapter that practices weekly under the leadership of Corlu Collier (Corlu Robinson in those earlier days). The group plays early and contemporary compositions and arrangements—including, of course, pieces by Paul Ashford.