Virginia Martin Howard Endows Stearns Lecture Series

In 1992, a sense of permanency comes to the Stearns Collection for the first time since Mr. Stearns gave it to the University in 1899. The annual lecture/demonstrations for January and February of 1992 begin the Virginia Martin Howard lecture series. Since 1975, the Stearns Collection has provided free presentations with such funds as were available through Friends support. Now thanks to Mrs. Howard, future plans for this valuable educational series can be made with assurance of funding.

Mrs. Howard's long interest in the Stearns is seen in this April, 1975 picture of the Frederick Stearns building. Virginia Howard was a member of the first board of the Friends of the Stearns and a contributor to this new facility. In 1986, the Stearns became part of the new wing of the School of Music and her original gift can be seen in the Vesta Mills Gallery. The specially designed case in the Music Library is also a result of her support (see Newsletter Vol. 4, No. 1). Another aspect of the collection now has been made permanent thanks to Virginia Howard's generous gift.

The Stearns 1992 challenge is $200,000 in endowment funds. These will guarantee that the exhibition, restoration, acquisition, and service programs of the collection can be equally secure.

Join us in January and February for the first Virginia Martin Howard Lectures and join in support of our programs by becoming a Friend of the Stearns.

At the dedication of the Frederick Stearns Building in 1975 are (from left to right) Stearns Director Robert Warner, University Vice-President Frank Rhodes, Virginia Martin Howard, Music School Dean Allen Britton, and ethnomusicology professor (and now, present Stearns Director) William Matm.

The Virginia Martin Howard Lectures

Unlocking The Secrets of Stradivari: A Renaissance in Modern Violin Making

Joseph Curtin and Gregg Alf, violin makers, will present the first lecture on January 12, 1992 at 2:00 p.m. in the Recital Hall at the School of Music. Since coming to Ann Arbor, Curtin and Alf have achieved international recognition with clients Ruggerio Ricci and Elmar Oliveira among others. They will explain and demonstrate the process they employ in making modern violins.

The Art of Violin Bow Making

On Sunday, February 9, 1992 at 2:00 p.m. in the School of Music Recital Hall, David Orlin will present the second Howard Lecture. Mr. Orlin is a professional bow maker. The art of bow making has been a separate discipline from violin making since the mid-1700s. Mr. Orlin will explain the difference between Baroque and Classical bows. He will also explain the process of making a modern bow and the restoration process used with Baroque bows.
Concert Artists and Instrument Makers: Their Interactions

by Daniel Burdick

Editor’s Note: This article is the result of a series of interviews with instrument makers and players: Joseph Curtin and Gregg Alf, violin (JC/GA); Lowell Greer, horn (LG); Ed Parmentier (EP) and Keith Hill (KH), harpsichord. Based on questions and ideas supplied by Mr. Parmentier, these interviews covered a wide range of topics. This article focuses on the interaction between the player and the maker during the building process. All the participants have international reputations as players and/or makers. Mr. Greer and Mr. Parmentier are professors at the School of Music.

What is the best way for a player to decide what kind of an instrument to get?

JG/ GA: Our advice would be fairly middle of the road. Don’t go for weird things; get something healthy. We have a general approach when someone comes to talk to us about an instrument. We basically see what they need and if we build that, then we’ll have a relationship. Otherwise, we help them find another maker. With some players, we help them select a model of violin that we will build. Certainly, part of us wants to accommodate the player—find just what they want—but also a strong part wants to do what we do and do it our best. We’re interested in making something so good that we’re fairly sure if we show it to someone, they will want it. We’re not interested in bending on some certain points. We want to make our own work. It’s a dual loyalty. First, we have a loyalty to our craft—to making the best instrument. And secondly, we have a loyalty to the musician—to help them find what they need and guide them to that instrument. Once it’s decided what model we’re going to make, then no longer is the client guiding us. Rather our own knowledge of the instrument is steering us—the model and the wood.

LG: The builder usually does a good amount of guiding. The primary styles of building would probably fall into the French bore and the Austro-Bohemian bore. The Austro-Bohemian horns have a wider bell profile. In fact our modern double horns are based on various sizes of Austro-Bohemian horns. The French instruments have a more slender profile throughout the instrument. The Austro-Bohemian instruments are a little more sonorous and richer in sound on the open notes, but the stopped notes are not as easily obtained. The French instruments have a more focused sound, but there is less difference between the open and stopped notes. So generally, soloists would tend to use French instruments while orchestral players play a combination of French and Austro-Bohemian horns.

I usually spell out the options for the player. I have, for my own use, examples of all those horns. So, by testing the instruments that I have, the player would be able to say, “Oh, yeah, this one seems to me, at this point, to be the one I’m interested in.” This is usually very successful. I haven’t had the exasperating situation of someone coming back weekly asking for changes because they aren’t satisfied with the horn. I think, at that point, I would say, “There is probably nothing more I can do for you. If you feel that you would like to try another instrument by a different maker, I’ll give you your money back.”

EP: It’s very important for customers to hear as many recordings of harpsichords as they can. In that way, they can say to the builder, “I want the treble on my harpsichord to be like the one on this recording—like this antique.” The builder will probably know these recordings or he/she can borrow them from the customer. The instrument can be planned accordingly.

There are a half-dozen books which describe the history of the harpsichord; read those. There are dozens of recordings; listen to them. Also, one can easily gain access to museums to see the antiques and in some cases, such as the Smithsonian, to play them. The Smithsonian, which is now the Museum of History and Technology, is a playing museum; so, you can go and really play the historical harpsichords and almost make a selection based on that trip.

If I was 25 years old and a graduate student or just getting started, I would take a month off in the summer and drive to as many builders’ shops as possible. Builders do not mind you calling on them even if you never are a customer because you might be a customer in the future. In Roehoboth, Massachusetts, there is a used harpsichord dealer. The Harpsichord Clearinghouse. In this shop, there are twenty to thirty harpsichords.
present at any one time, you can see a complete spectrum of all the types of modern harpsichords. It's even possible to start selecting a maker that way.

It is important to take a long view when buying a harpsichord. It might be best to buy a "no frills" model as a first harpsichord and really learn about harpsichords. Armed with this knowledge, you can spend a larger amount of money on a second harpsichord and be more confident that it is a quality instrument with the sound that you want.

**KIII:** Makers build what they talk about. And so, I always tell people, "Listen to what your maker is talking about because what they talk about is how your instrument is going to sound." Do you want a doctor who's concentrating on the wallpaper of his/her office? I don't! Builders are good at gab and what they say is what they're good at. If they're always talking about the body of the instrument, then you can pretty much be sure that they're furniture makers. If they're always talking about the core, then it's sure that you're going to get an instrument which will sound adequate and feel good. And if they're always talking about what you call the core, then it's sure that you're going to get an instrument which will sound adequate and feel good.

**LG:** The best time is after the instrument is completed. With old instruments, the fact that we have an eighteenth or nineteenth century model in mind enables us to say to someone, "This is the type of horn you'll get. We're not really going to change anything." With modern valve horns, I would definitely size the horn and customize it to the player. With an eighteenth or nineteenth century replica, I wouldn't do that because, of course, the horn is wrapped in a smaller circle than a modern horn. Most people have to play these replicas with the bell off the knee and they're lighter. So, really, it's a moot point. It's not like today where your hands have to be one place while the other part of your body is somewhere else. We don't have the type of stretches with the old horns that you do with modern horns.

Usually, the player tries a variety of my replicas to decide if they want me to do the work. When the instrument is finished, ordinarily we don't make any changes. It's possible to change tuning slides and crooks. If someone has difficulty playing an overtone on one of the crooks, for experimentation, I'll try another crook of the same taper. If that doesn't fix it, I'll try another with a different taper. Replacing crooks is historically correct. I found one horn in Lima, Peru with three Eb crooks. And sure enough, they were all bad. However, most natural horn players are of the mind that they want to own an instrument that's typical of the period and live with its problems.

**EP:** In general, there are many things that harpsichord customers can do. They can monitor the birth
How Do I Get to The Stearns?

The Stearns Collection of Musical instruments is located in the new Margaret Dow Towsley wing at the south end of the Earl V. Moore School of Music on Baits Drive in the University of Michigan North Campus area. Enter through the doors nearest to the parking lot. The Macintosh Vocal Arts Center is just across the hall and to the right of the entrance, and The Stearns galleries are down the stairs at the end of the hall to the right.

Admission: Free at all times.

Exhibit Hours: Thurs., Fri. 10-5; Sat., Sun. 1-8.

Group Visits and Tours: To arrange for group visits or guided tours by members of The Stearns Collection staff, please call (313) 763-4389.

Parking: Metered parking is available south of the entrance doors.

of their harpsichord monthly; they can bug the builder stage by stage. The customer and builder can respond to qualities that they didn’t expect of the harpsichord that is being build. When the harpsichord can first be played, that’s when the builder and the player need to have a meeting. The builder can share with the customer what he/she thinks the harpsichord is becoming. At that moment, the builder can say to the player, “Okay, my ear tells me that this is a loud harpsichord relative to other harpsichords. Therefore, I recommend a touch which is a little bit gentle.” With this information, the customer can make personal decisions.

Most customers are buying their first and only harpsichord. Therefore, it’s important for them to keep in touch with the builder. When I order a harpsichord, I know exactly what I want and the builder knows exactly what I want; there’s no discussion needed—he/she just calls me up when it’s finished. I don’t want to mess with it; it’s crucial that I stay out if it because we are talking about a very high level art work. You want to be surprised. You want the builder to just be an artist and be isolated to do whatever the chemistry of the maker’s mind tells him/her to do. I trust the builder that I use, Keith Hill, and I trust that he’ll make me a good harpsichord. He knows my tastes and what I want. He knows what kind of action I want. By becoming involved, I could stifle his creative process. However, my initial order is placed in great detail. I’ll say, for example, “I want a Flemish harpsichord. It’s got to sound kind of like this. It’s got to look kind of like that. It can’t weigh more than this amount. I want a thin instrument... I want a long instrument. And I’d like it to be a copy of this historical prototype.”

KH: When does a cook ask people’s opinion of the food?... After the initial order, I usually confer with the player when the harpsichord is finished. I’ve developed a way of thinking of how I was going to deal with players. They are usually subjective about the sound of a harpsichord. It’s like making a seven-course meal and when you ask them, “How was it?” people say, “I liked it.” That’s not real helpful! And so, I would assault the player with the statement, “I’m not interested particularly in your opinion of what was good. I’m only interested in your opinion of what you think could be improved or what was bad.” That’s really almost insulting. I have to challenge them because they play musical instruments for a living; they have to be political, i.e., they can’t afford to make enemies of the instrument makers. They won’t tell you what they think. And when I have managed to have the opportunity to assault them with that challenge of telling me what was wrong, they generally always would tell me what needed to be fixed or changed. With their comments, I had to be very objective and become a very acute judge of the judge.