

The Joy of Consorts

By Judith Wink

Just as one rotten apple can spoil the barrel, one rotten recorder player can spoil a consort. Tom rushes. Dick drags. Harry's sharp. April's flat. May knocks her stand over whenever she tries to turn a page. June mixes up her music. They all get lost, and they all ask those questions that chill the blood: "Where are we starting?" "Did you mean the very beginning?" "Were we supposed to repeat?" "What piece are we on?" Most groups have one of these treasures. Groups with exceptionally bad karma have two or three. If it takes that little to wreck a group — and it does, believe me it does — why do we bother? Why come to meetings? Why go to workshops? Why play in a group at all? Because when things go right, they're extraordinary.

Someday Tom will have a cold, Dick will be out of town on business, Harry will be minding the children for a change, April will be meeting with her lawyer, May will be trying to talk her daughter out of divorcing her husband, and June will be having root canal. Those who are left won't be world-class musicians, but with luck they'll at least be competent. With that as a starting point, good things can happen.

The first time through a new piece you're not likely to do much listening because you're too busy figuring out your own part. But the next few times, if you have any aptitude at all for consort playing, you'll start to hear things. Now and then the soprano line copies your tenor part. Let's agree on phrasing and articulation. The alto's got the tune here, so everybody else, let's pipe down and let it stand out. Here, in the middle of this fantasia, is a little galliard. Let's play a little shorter and make it sound like a dance. Here's a grand pause. Let's look up and make sure we start together.

In fact, let's make sure we're doing everything together. That's the whole point of consort playing. You're not a soloist, you're part of a whole, and the whole is a lot more than the sum of its parts. One veteran teacher used to arrange a class in a circle and then point to the center: "That's where you should hear the sound."

Recently, I heard the Boreas Quartet Bremen, four gifted young women playing recorder music from four centuries. The pieces had hot licks for everybody, and the players made the most of them, but in the middle of even the most intricate passages they kept looking up at each other, making sure that this was a group project instead of four solos. The best accompanist I ever saw was a young guitarist named Robin Polseno. Onstage with four singers, two on each side of him, he kept looking up at them like a border collie keeping track of his flock.

At its best, a recorder consort sounds like an organ, with one mind in control. Of course the sound isn't a lot of undifferentiated mush, you can certainly hear individual lines, but there's

a sense of common conception and purpose. The tuning's locked in, everybody's phrasing the same way, the dynamics rise and fall together. It's like watching the four cygnets in Swan Lake or a beautifully executed football play. It's a miraculous thing to be part of.