

FoMRHI – A History

FoMRHI (the H is silent as in rhododendron or the first part of rhythm) began in our sitting room in London before the first day of the Early Musical Instrument Exhibition at the Royal College of Music in 1975. Ephraim Segerman and Djilda Abbott were staying with us, as was John Cousen because who can afford hotels these days? Eph and Djilda had long thought that there was room for a less formal musical instrument society than the Galpin or AMIS, one that would publish quickly and frequently to provide good communication between members, one that would make decisions democratically and not just by those who lived within spitting distance of London. But they didn't want the hassle of running it. I had resigned as Honorary Secretary of the Galpin Society not long before because, in part, people had objected to the informality of my Bulletins. I had maintained, as Eric Halfpenny, the first Honorary Secretary had done before me, that the Journal was formal but that the Bulletin was, as it were, a letter from the Honorary Secretary to each member, and that if we were a Society, we were all members of it and, we hoped, friends and colleagues.

So they asked, would I be interested in running it? The informality suited me, and I was in favour of the other ideas, too. So Eph became Honorary Editor, with Djilda to help him, and I became Honorary Secretary and, because we had no money, Honorary Treasurer. Honorary in English means that you do it for the honour of it and you don't get paid; if you're lucky you might get your expenses back.

Next we had to find a name. I was firm that it would get known by its initials and therefore we needed to pick an acronym that could be pronounced and this, of course, also affected the name. We were targeting makers, and we were dealing with historical instruments, and we were also interested in restorers, and eventually we decided to be a fellowship, rather than a society, and so we became The Fellowship of Makers and Restorers of Historical Instruments, and this is why, to make it pronounceable, FoMRHI has a small o and the rest capitals. The conservators objected to the Restorers bit after a few years, so to make them happy, and to keep the acronym the same, we became Researchers, though grammatically you can't research of; Makers of and Researchers in HI was too much of a mouthful.

So that was how we got our name. That evening I typed up a membership form, got it photocopied on the way into town, and signed up our first members as the Exhibition was getting ready to open. We decided on a two-tier membership. Those who had contributed to the field and who other members felt were reliable in scholarship would become Fellows and have votes; anybody was welcome to be a member, but unless he was a contributor there was no reason why he should decide how the Fellowship should function. Let the givers run the show and the takers were welcome to take what they liked but not to tell the givers what to do. In fact this has become a dead letter; there's not been anything to vote about for years, but when there was, all voting was by postal ballot so that all Fellows had an equal say irrespective of where they lived.

We were international right from the beginning, and to aid communication all overseas subscriptions covered airmail postage. However, when postal costs started to go through the roof, we had to give that up and give people the option of air or surface, which I regret. Air is slow enough; why does it take five days to get letters to USA when the plane takes a third of one? And surface mail seems to go by rowboat, or maybe they put it in bottles, toss it in the drink and wait to see where it lands up.

We decided that subject to the laws of libel and total incomprehensibility, we'd print anything that the members sent in. No refereeing. If you don't agree, argue with him or her in the next issue. There've been a lot of good arguments over the years. We decided that nobody had time

to type things up. What the members sent, we printed. Which was a bit limiting because it meant that we had to insist on a typewriter, or later a word processor, and we had to send things back that were double spaced, because they'd take too much room, or typed with a clapped out ribbon because it wouldn't photocopy clearly. Even then some of the early issues were pretty poor, but we argued with our printer and with our members and things improved.

Each issue, of which there are four a year, which is why it's called FoMRHI Quarterly (FoMRHIQ), has a Bulletin, which I wrote, with notes, news, etc, and however many Communications (Comms for short) the members send in. Since 1975 we'd notched up 1726 Comms in 100 Qs by the time Eph and I retired. Some of them been nonsense, some have been highly speculative, many have been very valuable. The range of subjects has been infinite; anything to do with instruments and with what you can do with them, to them, on them, at them, about them, has all been grist to our mill, and sometimes it has ground coarsely and sometimes pretty fine.

Our aim was, and remained, the promotion of authenticity in the construction, restoration, conservation, use, you name it, of historical instruments. We thought that we were still necessary, for there's a vast amount of junk on the market, instruments that bear no relationship to anything that was ever used before 1970 except in vague appearance, and the appearance doesn't make any sound; it's the sound that counts. Music is sound, and if you make the right noise, maybe you'll get somewhere near the right music; if you make the wrong noise, you haven't a hope in hell of making the right music.

However, after Eph and I retired and Lewis Jones and Dave Armitage took over, FoMRHI first dwindled, then became irregular, and at last softly and silently faded away.