

FIELD NOTES

Jim Leary  
April 9, 1985

"Vienna Strings"  
Gasthaus Zur Krone  
839 South 2nd Street  
Milwaukee

A month previously I visited Zur Krone for part of an afternoon and talked with the proprietor, Bill Neumann, who opened the Gasthaus roughly seven years ago after being laid off by a Milwaukee factory. The place offers over 100 beers from around the world and its walls are festooned with posters from various parts of Germany along with pictures of German princes, emperors, and kaisers. On Sunday night Al Mueller plays zither beginning at 7:30, and on Tuesday nights the Vienna Strings play "Schrammel Music." Bill reckoned it would be fine to record at the place during one of the regular performances, and he also offered the bar as a recording space on Monday nights when the tavern is otherwise closed. Subsequently I wrote to Al Mueller of the Vienna Strings and set up this evening's recording session.

Lewis Koch and I arrived around 7:45 as the musicians were beginning to set up. They typically set up against the back wall of a small alcove and play for roughly two hours. Armin Nolte, violinist, shook our hands immediately and introduced us to the other musicians: Al Mueller, zither; Doug Haese, piano accordion; and John Formella violin. Excepting Haese, approaching 36, the men were all older, ranging from 56 to 72. Armin was the "leader" and it was he who related information regarding "Schrammel Music" and the Vienna Strings' origin. Schrammel was an Viennese musician who, in the 19th century, headed small orchestras with lead and second violins, accordion, and double-necked Austrian guitar. It was "cafe music"--Strauss waltzes, some other dance pieces, smooth melodic numbers--popularized in the beer gardens and wine stubes of Vienna. Schrammel worked out arrangements for his music as well. Some five years ago Bill Neumann was trying to find musicians who might play this genre at his

tavern. Armin offered to try, although he'd never heard of the music. His son was about to travel to Europe and he returned with arrangements for "Schrammel music." Meantime Armin had been playing classical violin duets with John Formella who he had met through a string repair shop. Formella joined in as did Haese and Al Mueller. Nowadays the group plays at Zur Krone, the Bavarian Inn, and a few other places. They've recently received more arrangements from a Viennese professor who was contacted through the Ministry of Culture and Agriculture.

While exchanging information, Lewis and I set up our recording and photographic gear. The room presented some acoustic problems. According to accordionist Jean Rex, about whom more will be said in notes for April 11, all of the instruments should be heard equally--violins should carry the melody, but accordion and zither fills and bass patterns should be evident as well. The violins' high pitch reverberated, however, to the extent that they drowned out the other instruments. To boot, Mueller's amplified zither gave out heavy bass sounds, but the higher melodic runs were obscured. Consequently it took considerably fiddling around with microphone placement to achieve a balanced sound true to the genre's aesthetic. The first seven or so performances are trial recordings with mikes set in various spots; thereafter experimentation gave way to the best possible setup given the instruments and location.

The orchestra played 30 numbers, all of which were rendered with skill and feeling. Armin presided by announcing the title of each tune in German and, often, in English. He and the others discussed what to play in between performances. Although their tunes are taken from various sources, they have resorted to a common numbering system so that they can call out # 14 or #16 and flip pages to the appropriate arrangement.

The crowd was enthusiastic but somewhat restrained in deference to the fact that we were recording. Here and there I tried to loosen up the atmosphere by applauding inbetween tunes, but people were generally quiet and respectful as the musicians moved from one rendition to the next.

After about two hours of intermittent playing--including three half hour tapes--it was quitting time. John Formella left almost right away, but the other three musicians hung around and I was able to quiz them a little on their backgrounds. Should there be more time it would be well worth conducting further sessions with both Al Mueller and Doug Haese.

But to begin with Armin: He was born in 1927 in Milwaukee where he attended high school and Marquette University. He's a social worker, married with two kids. His dad was born in Hanover and emigrated in 1923. A's mother was from Appleton. The senior Nolte was a violinist and he pushed Armin into taking up the instrument. Besides playing "high school orchestra fiddle," Armin had played classical duets, as mentioned previously, with John Formella. He requested that we at the Folklife Center make an effort to get copies of our records, books, etc. placed with the Goethe Institute at the Milwaukee Public Museum.

Doug Haese was born 5/27/49 in Milwaukee. He began playing piano accordion at 8 and took lessons until 16. He played in accordion bands and in programs put on by the LaDuca brothers wherein he won trophies for playing solos. His dad plays classical violin. Doug's been with the Vienna Strings for three years and, conveniently, he's been a full time bartender at Zur Krone for the past 5 years after being laid off from a bookkeeping job. He favors German and Bavarian folk music and has played for quite awhile with Bavarian dance groups--Schuhplattlers. He learned many tunes from an older first generation immigrant accordionist. When playing with the Schuhplattlers, Doug often uses a four row

button accordion made by Anton Karpek of Milwaukee.

Al Mueller's background is a little different. He was born in 1913, a Swiss-American, in New Glarus. As a young man he took up the zither and was recorded by Helen Stratman-Thomas in 1940. Shortly thereafter, in 1942, he moved to Milwaukee. He joined the Milwaukee Zither Club and is still an active member. He's played his zither over the radio and had a steady job, 6 nights a week for 7 or so hours, at The Golden Zither restaurant. His zither is homemade with a wooden body and pickup mikes. He put it together more than 40 years ago and later painted it gold to match his restaurant gig. He's been playing with the Vienna Strings for 3 years and has played solo at Zur Krone for 7 years. For his solo gigs he has a different repertoire: Swiss and German tunes, pop standards, and assorted "foreign" standards like "Somewhere My Love" and "Edelweiss." Because of his long experience as a zither player, his instrument making innovation, his technical skill, and his varied repertoire, he'd be wealth worth interviewing in depth. With luck, there'll be time and money to allow this to happen.