Old music, old friends

By NANCY SMIRL JORGENSEN

The duck band is back in session. After a nine-month hiatus my house is filled once again with tweeting flippers, buzzing crumhorns and vibrating cornamuses.

For more than 25 years my friends Sandy and Jo and I have pursued a music that was played when Columbus began his explorations. We fell in love with recorders (precursors of the flute) and collected them in sizes from bass to soprano (and even have the baby-sized sopranino, no more than a few inches in length.) We also dabble in capped reed instruments that produce a primitive, buzzing sound, daring the average musician to play them in tune.

Our efforts to combine one or more reed instruments with a recorder, psaltery or harp occupy many an evening that we consider entertaining; our families, however, know at the end of a session why these musical horns are often maligned as “duck band” instruments. The vibrant droning noises we find so enchanting sound more like a quacking racket to our husbands and teenagers unaccustomed to the beauty of a Renaissance refrain.

When we began our musical mission, Jo was mother to two toddlers; Sandy was raising her brood of four; and I was in college. Over the years, we repeatedly endured interruptions to our practice timetable and devised rehearsal schedules to accommodate our busy lives. Our musical pursuit has taken a back seat at times to Jo’s return to college to study and earn her degree, the birth of my two daughters and Sandy’s frequent family additions of grandchildren (12 now).

Being women of the 21st century (while enjoying music dating to the 14th century) all three of us have held jobs, committed to volunteer causes and pursued other obligations that defy us to find time for this ancient interest.

For almost 30 years now we have sustained our love of music and our friendship with each other, delighting in making music together. Most rehearsals begin with tea and sweets (another ancient tradition), shift to progress reports on each of our families and eventually advance to the musical rehearsal. While it sometimes seems social aspects of our evenings outweigh the musical practice we put in, we have accomplished enough over the years to prepare a repertoire of music.

We have played for churches, art fairs, conventions, fund-raisers and women’s organizations. Our venues have included the railing of a Catholic choir balcony, a mosquito-infested grassy lawn, and the hot concrete of a strip mall sidewalk. Sometimes in concert black, and sometimes in Renaissance costume, we share our love of ancient music with our churches and our favorite causes. Occasionally there is remuneration that we use to purchase new music or instruments, but more often we donate our time and resources.

As we discover new music and re-create the sounds of old we maintain a musical wish list. Among the three of us we have accumulated a dozen recorders, a cornamuse, crumhorns, two dulcimers, guitars, drums, cymbals, a harp and psaltery. Still on the wish list are a serpent (ancient brass horn — impossible to play in tune) and a contrabass recorder (so large the player cannot reach both the finger holes and the mouth piece without an extension to the lips). Perhaps one day we will acquire these new instruments, but until then we face challenges enough with our existing library of music and our present collection of winds and strings.

If endurance defines value, we are very rich. Not only have we discovered music that has endured throughout the centuries, we have created for ourselves an ensemble of musicianship and friendship that is resilient and strong and steadfastly enduring. While some may insult the ancient sounds, we boldly suffer the musical slur “duck band” to play our pleasure and perpetuate an ancient musical tradition.