



AMICA International

Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association

Honor Roll

AMICA HONORARY MEMBER
DR. LYLE W, DOWNEY

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In late 1974 the AMICA Board of Directors approved the application of Dr. Lyle W. Downey for honorary membership in our society. He has an interesting background as the following biographical sketch illustrates.

In the very beginning, Lyle Downey was apprenticed to a cabinetmaker while in school between the ages of 9-17. As a result of this work he became familiar with furniture styles, construction, quality of workmanship, woods and finishes.

Lyle worked with musical instruments all his life, beginning as a violinist, then cellist. The cello he practiced and played seriously, playing in theater orchestras as young as 12 because cellists were few in number in Decatur, Illinois where Lyle lived. Somehow the family never worried about tools in the shop, particularly power tools and the fingers of a musician. He seemed always to pair mechanical work with artistic endeavors.

Next came a period in Chicago following graduation from the American Conservatory. Jobs in music were difficult to obtain, so he worked as a layout engineer for the Sievert Construction Co., building a community mausoleum in Glen Oak Cemetery, Chicago. Later, the engineering experience was to come in handy when, as head of the Music Department at San Jose State University, he could work with the California State Architects on the real needs inherent in the new music building; such as having a door wide enough for a concert grand piano to be moved onto the music stage!

In Lyle's lifelong hobbies of collecting various antiques and art, he has had some exciting experiences. In 1919-1920 in Urbana, Illinois, he discovered his first Orchestrion in a student-favored restaurant down town. It was

such an unusual musical experience that his enthusiasm brought him back many times even when money for a full dinner was lacking. In 1924 the Mills Violano became part of his interests.

Being in the business of music-making himself, playing cello in theater orchestras, and as a soloist on occasions, his orchestra (Civic Symphony) experience in the Chicago area took him to Voit and Geiger, a leading violin shop in the area, for better instruments. Right across the street was an old fiddle maker who had gone into the business of ordering violins for the automatic musical instruments, the Violano and the Orchestrion. This became a major business for the little shop. He ordered the violins

in an unfinished state, "carcass form," and Lyle was just the young man to help by working part time, filling and varnishing the wood, applying fingerboards strings, and pegs. Then he got to help with placing the instruments inside the frame, as in the Violano. They had to make adjustments in the revolving discs of the bows, and there were no standard bows to re-hair after the mechanical and automatic set-up came in. This was fascinating business to Lyle.

His third episode with automatic music instruments came about ten years later in New York, While working in the field of academic music at Eastman School, University of Rochester in 1934-35 and while on sabbatical leave from Kansas State University, he became acquainted with the staff at American Piano Company in East Rochester, New York. He got to see the various divisions, the selection process in the choice of woods, and the main sections for individual piano manufacture such as Mason & Hamlin, Knabe, etc. There he discovered the automatic pianos with Ampico actions and was allowed to work on the installation of the mechanism.

One of the significant things in Lyle's later years as Music Department Head at San Jose State was the development of one of the earliest Humanities type courses in academia. Lyle, working with the heads of Art and Drama Divisions began "Correlation of the Arts" which eventually became a requirement in all three departments for upper division work. The fields of visual arts, painting, drawing and dramatic arts, theater and music were drawn together in a very live course which grew up over a period of 20 years.

Amica is pleased to welcome Dr. Lyle W. Downey as an Honorary member.