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## The musician and the engineer: 75 years of STUDIO 49: inseparably linked with Carl Orff

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## The musician and the engineer

### 75 years of STUDIO 49: inseparably linked with Carl Orff

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#### A sailor's souvenir became a model instrument

The beginning of STUDIO 49 actually goes back much further than the founding year of 1949 suggests. Carl Orff talked about his first experience with a barred instrument when he gave a speech at the inauguration of the new installations. He described how, in 1928, friends had given him a "Kaffir Piano" - as it was called at the time - which a sailor had brought back from Cameroon, a kind of xylophone made from a small rectangular wooden box labelled "10,000 wooden pegs" with ten sound bars attached to the open side with strings. The instrument was played with a mallet and, according to Orff, had "an amazingly good sound". This provided him with a model instrument for his own work and the Orff instrumentarium. However, there was still a long way to go from this original instrument to the xylophone and to the development of other barred percussion instruments.



The original 'souvenir'



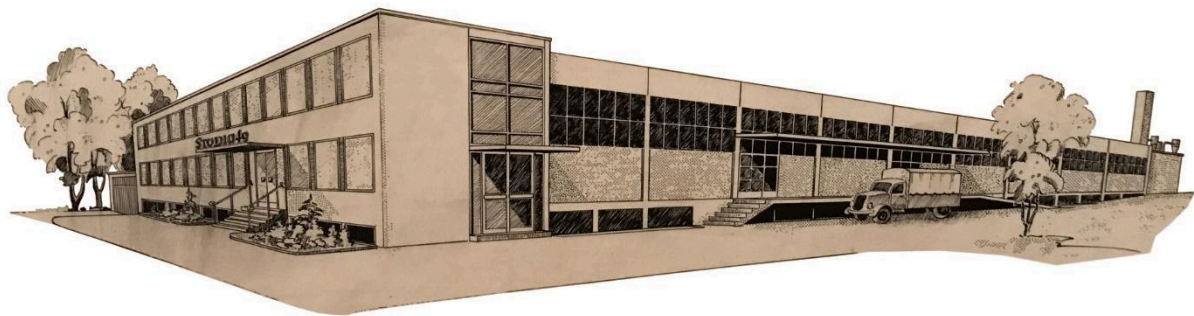
Latest model alto xylophone AX2000

STUDIO 49 has been manufacturing Orff instruments in Gräfelfing near Munich since 1949. Klaus Becker-Ehmck, the father of the current company owner, built the first instruments in his garage at home based on the ideas of his friend Carl Orff. Grandma's washing machine motor was used to drive the machines. Frequently Klaus Becker-Ehmck took the instruments to Orff's house in Dießen to discuss their construction and sound with him. As the "spiritual father" of the instruments, Carl Orff wanted to see his ideas realised in terms of sound. The two friends worked tirelessly to create an instrumentarium that has since become an integral part of elemental music and movement education worldwide. Another proof that ingenuity, imagination and creativity have already produced some great achievements. 75 years of STUDIO 49: a milestone in the world of music education, but also a sonorous journey through different musical spaces in a metaphorical sense. "Everything is imagination", Orff's underlying philosophy and approach to musical education and creation, was also his driving force,

constantly opening new doors to images, feelings, associations and ideas - without rigid rules and boundaries.

### **Initial difficulties**

However, STUDIO 49 had its limits during the early years. Limited availability and unsuitable materials for the construction of the instruments, especially for the mallet instruments, made the start difficult. In a circular from 1952, the company had to regretfully inform its customers that "the bottleneck in the field of tone steel continues unabated and there is little prospect of being able to make regular deliveries for the foreseeable future." After the Second World War, the steel industry was at rock bottom and it would be some time before it flourished again. This shortage was met with the polite request to "refrain from ordering glockenspiels". But the rise of the Orff-Schulwerk was unstoppable. After Bavarian Radio broadcast the first school radio programme on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1948, interest grew from year to year. Nobody had expected such an immense response and the associated demand. This was soon followed by a phase of expansion of the existing range of instruments in order to do justice to Carl Orff's ideas and conceptions. The rapidly growing demand for instruments finally led to the foundation stone being laid in autumn 1956 for the company's own premises with a joinery, metalworking shop, paint shop, assembly, storage and office space. From 1961 onwards, experience in the construction of mallet instruments also enabled the production of professional orchestral instruments such as the vibraphone, marimba, concert xylophone and concert glockenspiel.



Sketch of the new building, 1957.

### **Continuous further development**

Company founder Klaus Becker-Ehmck tirelessly developed the instruments further. A single-row instrument, whose whole and half tones were fixed on a string, soon became two separate boxes with whole and half tone boxes and removable bars. All this would never have been possible if the materials of the prototypes had not been guarded like a treasure. In order to minimise the risk of destruction, the raw materials needed to build the first instruments, which Carl Orff had developed together with harpsichord maker Karl Maendler, were scattered all over the Bavarian capital during the bombing of the Second World War. The potential of the Orff-Schulwerk could then be fully realised when class music-making resumed after the war:

where the recorder had previously been the instrument of choice, percussion instruments now opened up a whole new world for making music together in a group, as the sound was immediately audible and "tangible". This lowered inhibition threshold for playing an instrument certainly played a major role in the rapid spread of the Schulwerk.



Visit in 1969 for the 20th anniversary of the firm:  
Carl Orff and Klaus Becker-Ehmck in the workshop



From left to right: Gunild Keetman, Klaus Becker-Ehmck, Carl Orff and Liselotte Orff

Today, STUDIO 49 supplies music retailers around the world. In the early years, however, it was not possible to utilise this distribution channel, as the shops preferred to concentrate on well-known products that promised quick sales. Instead, the Orff-Schulwerk Associations played a central role in the distribution of the instruments. Wherever Orff-Schulwerk teachers had established themselves, a new market opened. The trade followed suit when the sales opportunities became more promising. The first major markets to be emphasised here were primarily Northern European countries such as Denmark, Finland and Sweden.

### **Emphasis on sound quality**

It was not only increasing demand that contributed to rapid sales, but also a consistently high standard of quality from the very beginning. Excerpt from a customer communication from 1952: "We detest the idea of producing instruments that leave something to be desired in terms of sound performance in order to save a few marks. After all, the buyer has to listen to them day in, day out. It would therefore prove to be a false thrift." And further, also to emphasise Carl Orff's claim: "Our close collaboration with Carl Orff proves almost daily that only the best is good enough and one can hardly pay enough attention to what Carl Orff says in the introduction to Volume II "*Orff-Schulwerk - Musik für Kinder*":

*"When purchasing or supplementing the instrumentarium, make sure you buy real musical instruments and not, unfortunately very common, inadequate musical toys, which only prove to be aurally harmful and nerve-damaging."*

The company founder, Klaus Becker-Ehmck, died in 1976. His wife Marga, who had been instrumental in building up the company, continued the tradition of the company. Their son, Bernd Becker-Ehmck, then took over the family business with worldwide sales markets and a comprehensive programme ranging from instruments for early childhood music education to orchestral instruments.

In principle, the geometry of the instruments has hardly changed since the early years, especially in the case of the glockenspiels. The philosophy at STUDIO 49 has always been that pure "facelifts" (visual changes) were never an option for the company. The changes always went hand in hand with the technical requirements of the market. Both father and son always had improvements to the sound in mind: optimisation of the resonance chambers, changes to the material and design of the pins or even improved support of the sound bars. Bernd Becker-Ehmck continued to run the company for over 41 years. The STUDIO 49 series is now in its fourth generation since the company was founded, and each generation has been significantly improved in terms of sound, durability and practicality. Last but not least, the 1000 series with its flat, easy-to-carry mallet instruments is very popular all over the world. The many years of experience in the construction of high-quality orchestral mallet instruments are also reflected today in the further development of the sound of Orff instruments. The principle of building musical instruments that are of lasting value and therefore fulfil the criteria of sustainability has always applied and still applies today.

Another change recently took place at the beginning of 2024, the 75th anniversary of the company's founding: Jakob von Wolff will continue to run STUDIO 49 as a family business as the new owner and managing director. He has already worked for many years as a manager in the music industry and is therefore ideally placed to continue the work of Carl Orff and the history of STUDIO 49.

Further information with several photos and a short video interview with Bernd Becker-Ehmck: <https://www.studio49.de/en/ueber-uns/history-of-studio-49.html>

All photos: Copyright Studio 49



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