

The Newsletter for US United Serpents

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First International Serpent Festival Scheduled for October 1989

Mark your calendar! October 20-22, 1989, will be the date for the First International Serpent Festival. The event will be held in Columbia, South Carolina, and sponsored by the University of South Carolina and United Serpents. The festival begins Friday evening with performances by American (and perhaps European and English non-London Serpent Trio) soloists and ensembles. During this first session the world premiere of Simon Proctor's "A Snake in the Glass: Duet for Serpent and Glass Armonica" will be performed. Saturday includes afternoon performances by two American 18th-century military bands (playing English and French literature) and a United Serpents Grande Band performance. Saturday evening will feature members of the London Serpent Trio as they portray the serpent in its church, orchestra, chamber, and small ensemble settings. A world premiere of Simon Proctor's "Concerto for Serpent" will be performed by Alan Lumsden, and an American premiere of Robert Steadman's "Concert for Three Serpents" will be performed by the Trio. The grand finale of the Festival will occur on Sunday afternoon with a recital by the London Serpent Trio. Interspersed

throughout the weekend will be many occasions for informal playing and socializing and, if possible, formal paper presentations on the various aspects of serpent research.

Unlike past serpent gatherings which have included formal instruction, this "meeting of the clan" focuses primarily upon performance. All serpentists and keyed serpentists who attend the festival will be invited to perform Saturday afternoon with the United Serpent Grande Band. For those soloists and ensembles who wish to perform on the Friday evening program, please write United Serpents for details.

Presently, we have a commitment from National Public Radio to record the festival and edit the tapes for national broadcast. But do not plan to merely listen to the performances on the radio. Come to South Carolina in October to actually take part in the festivities! Festival programs (with registration and accommodations information) will be sent to you in June.

Get Ready-- the 400th Anniversary is Approaching!!

Christopher Monk is making plans for the 400th anniversary/extravaganza of the serpent. London on July 14, 1990, has been tentatively set as the location and date. A one-week workshop will precede the event. Details will be forthcoming.

The Serpents of Beauchamp House by Tom Dibley

During the summer of 1987 fifteen faithful devotees of the serpent gathered at Beauchamp House, near Gloucester, for a week-long workshop under the friendly guidance of members of the London Serpent Trio. One wet Sunday we all converged on

Gloucester. Those who came by train recognized one another by their serpent cases and made friends at the station. The others arrived in twos and threes by car and began pitching their tents in the paddock, an area watched over by a pair of goats. We all met for tea in the barn. In spite of its name the barn served as a small concert hall and was equipped with an excellent kitchen as well as showers and washrooms for the campers. This was to be our common room for the week; it was also used by the Renaissance music and dance classes that were going on at the same time as ours. There were thus frequent cries of wrath when they announced that the serpents were to rehearse in one room and the musicians were to be in another. In the end we got them to say "serpents and other musicians."

Our studies began in earnest on the Monday morning, after the older and craftier members of the class had managed to evade the morning physical calisthenics organised by the dancers. Christopher Monk, "Dean of Studies" and leader of the Trio, taught us the basic techniques of tone production and the warming-up routine he finds effective. His words on the care and maintenance of the instrument were especially valuable, for he is a serpent-maker of many years' standing and speaks with the voice of experience. (In fact, most the Beauchamp House party were playing serpents he had made; the few antique instruments were often leaky and did not function as well as his.) Everyone in the course had something to contribute; one, though a novice serpent-player, was able to tell us a lot about the chemistry of oils and their effects on the bore of the instrument.

The warming-up lesson proved useful the next day; the aged did their musical work-out while the others were doing their exercises. Then our tutor was Alan Lumsden, our host at Beauchamp House and a trombonist of repute. He showed us many subtly different ways of phrasing and articulating the notes by breathing different syllables

into our serpents; most of them he had found in early methods for the sackbut or the recorder.

Andrew van der Beek, the third member of the Trio (there are six altogether) introduced us to the Anaconda. Two Yorkshiremen made this unique double-bass serpent about a hundred and fifty years ago-- and how well they made it! It is twice the size of the ordinary instrument and weighs forty-two pounds. It is therefore carefully lowered onto Andrew's lap by two assistants before he begins to play. He uses the original very deep mouthpiece, once likened to a coffee cup, and produces a splendidly rich sound. He has to use a partly reversed system of fingering since the six keys that correspond to the finger-hole normally stand closed and have to be pressed to be opened.

This class teaching took up the first half of each morning. After a few minutes of conversation and coffee the group would split up, some to practise alone or to have individual lessons from Christopher, and others to play trios and quartets wherever they could find an empty room. Until very recently composers seem to have overlooked the serpent quartet as a serious art form, so we tackled madrigals and part-songs instead. These were often said to be "apt for voices or viols"; we found them most apt for our serpents. To one brought up on classical clarinet music they were a revelation and a source of much delight. Even more exciting, when there were enough people free, was the music written in Italy for cornetts and sackbuts. Best of all was a Palestrina motet in eight parts.

Afternoons were left free for sleeping, shopping or sight-seeing. Our music began again at tea-time with rehearsals for the "end of term" concert. After rehearsals some of us were brave enough to join the dancers and be initiated into the mysteries of the branles

and the Black Almain. The fun and games usually went on after supper until everyone was too tired to go on. One night the dancers put on an excellent display for the others; two evenings later we had a barn dance with music by the Melstock Band, after the pattern of Thomas Hardy's "Under the Greenwood Tree."

The climax, and I suspect the whole purpose of the week, was our concert at St. John's, Smith Square. In this lovely setting the Trio played part of the Fireworks Music. I said that composers had neglected the serpent until recently; we heard next how effectively it can cope with the modern idiom in Simon Proctor's "Three Songs," written especially for the Trio. Then they introduced the Anaconda and gave a demonstration of the straightened-out serpent which required two players, as its finger-holes were some six feet from the mouthpiece. After the interval all the available players in the country took the stage. (We managed to muster twenty-three; five more were unable to be present.) Saint-Saens' "Tortoises" performed their languorous can-can; his "Elephants" swung into action with splendid aplomb. They teetered apprehensively on their toes in B major for the "Sylph's Dance," and finally collapsed with a resounding bump. All great fun; how Gerard Hoffnung would have enjoyed it.

Things became more serious with three modern dance arrangements for a serpent choir, the trio section, a blues, being played by the Trio. Finally the First VIII serpentists gave the first European performance of the delightful and witty "Amherst Suite" by Simon Proctor. As well as a part for the anaconda it includes a cadenza for the worm, another of Christopher's creations, a tiny sopranino almost too small to play.

So we heard serpents of all sizes on that memorable occasion. What a wonderful evening it was, and what a wonderful week. I, for one, will never forget it.



Some of the serpents from Beauchamp House

Serpents in Harmony

excerpts from the July 25, 1987, *Serpent Extravaganza* review by
Huge Cole, *The Guardian*, Monday, July 27, 1987, p. 12.

"Christopher Monk's lively introduction encouraged us not to take the serpents too seriously and explained why so many people are fascinated by these genial unpredictable instruments. A new work, 'Redhot Polka' by Robert Steadman, even suggested that the serpent might find a place in the avant-garde world; note clusters were embedded like noodles in rich serpent soup.

An octet by Simon Proctor was also well designed to display serpents in a number of moods in the ballroom and on parade. Alan Lumsden showed that the instrument can sing the blues quite effectinglly,...."



Serpent duet performed by Chris Vanden Berg (l.) and Robert Wagenknecht (r.) as part of a concert given by the Band of Musick of His Majesty's 64th Regiment of Foot (directed by Lloyd P. Farrar) in front of Audley End House, Saffron Walden, Essex, England, on August 31, 1987.

The Ophicleide by Stephen J. Weston

The trombone must be considered an oddity in the modern brass family because of its distinct mechanism, yet how much odder would seem an instrument of trombone range which uses an ascending mechanism, achieving its chromaticism by the use of keys which shorten the tube. Such an instrument was, and is, the ophicleide. The present tense must be used because of the

slow-moving, but steady revival of interest in this distinctive piece of Victoriana, which played a vital role in the Romantic orchestra, and which has never been adequately replaced.

The name "ophicleide" means "keyed serpent," the instrument deriving its ancestry from the side-holed, cup-mouthpiece family which started with the cornett and includes Weidinger's keyed trumpet for which Haydn wrote his concerto.

The ophicleide rejected the serpent's sinuosity and instead adopted an upright shape, doubled back on itself, owing something to the form of the bassoon. The bass instrument in C is of conical bore expanding from about 15mm to a bell diameter in the region of 200mm. The nine to twelve keys are proportional to the bore at the point they are mounted, and resemble the larger keys of a tenor saxophone. The difference between the ophicleide and woodwind keyworks is that, apart from the large first key, mounted on the bell, all the keys are closed, there being no open finger holes. An eleven-keyed bass in C has a fully-chromatic range from the fundamentals to the eighth harmonic, giving a range from the third B below middle C to the first C above middle C.

The timbre is highly individual, giving a hollow euphonium-like quality but resembling a full-blooded contrabassoon when played forte; and yet, because of the mechanics of the instrument, and the fact that only the notes of the B series employ the bell, the overall effect cannot really be likened to contemporary instruments.

The ophicleide was invented by the Frenchman Halary in 1817, and yet patent was deferred until 1821 because the instrument was thought to resemble the basse-guerriere of Dumas, which was in fact a bass clarinet. Some of the finest ophicleides were made in the second half of the century by Gautrot Aine and Courtois. The

English virtuoso Samuel Hughes, who was professor at the Guildhall, used some remarkable twelve keyed Courtois instruments which are still extant today. The instrument was never really accepted in the Prussian states.

The ophicleide was given a role as contrabass to the trombone section, a position filled by the contrabasson in some of Beethoven's works. Berlioz used the orchestral C ophicleide in conjunction with the military B flat to eliminate problems caused by those notes produced by keys most distant from the bell; these can have a muffled quality. With instruments pitched one tone apart problem notes will only appear on one instrument at a time. This is why the *Symphonie Fantastique* has two tuba (originally ophicleide) parts. Sometime after 1858 Berlioz gave permission for the B flat part to be played on an E flat tuba; the tuba of the time was of much narrower bore than the modern instrument and was more compatible with the ophicleide. The present author has performed the Berlioz *Te Deum* on a mid-century ophicleide by Boose sharing the double part with a modern double E flat tuba. The effect was interesting, but totally unbalanced, the ophicleide merely adding an edge to the mellow timbre of the tuba. There is certainly a case for using a section of medium bore tenor trombones, a small single E flat bass tuba and an original ophicleide in C for authentic performances of Berlioz works. Perhaps the time is coming when trombonists will be expected to double on medium or even narrow-bore instruments.

One of the most celebrated ophicleide parts is that in Mendelssohn's "Overture to a Midsummer Night's Dream," now usually played on a tuba, although a four-value euphonium would be preferable, because of the range, where the original instrument is unavailable. Schumann, Wagner and Verdi, amongst others, used the ophicleide occasionally.

The tuba is, of course, the natural choice to replace the ophicleide as, apart from bore profile, mouthpiece, mechanism, timbre and range it is exactly similar. All that has been said in favour of the baroque flute, oboe, and violin is doubly true of the ophicleide, as the instrument which replaces it belongs to a different family. An analogy would be replacing a contrabassoon with a baritone saxophone.

The ophicleide revival, which was probably instigated by David Rycroft in 1965 has continued up to the recent formation of the London Ophicleide Ensemble. The greatest current ophicleidist is undoubtedly Alan Lumsden, perhaps better known as a sackbut and serpent player. Bevan (*The Tuba Family*, London, 1978) describes him as having "the dexterity of a trained flautist and the embouchure of a professional trombonist." It is this last point which is of most significance to trombonists; while tuba players such as (the late) John Fletcher, Stephen Wick and Clifford Bevan himself are successful ophicleidists, the mouthpiece and range of the ophicleide are much closer to the trombone, and it may be that, as the trend towards authenticity creeps through the twentieth century, more trombonists may take up the challenge and join the small, but dedicated group of exponents of this strange but obsessive instrument.

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Do Serpents Hibernate??

Organizational Structure for US

Many months have passed since the last US newsletter. While my procrastination cannot be totally ruled out, there is one important explanation. United Serpents is presently seeking non-profit status (within the state of South Carolina) so that it may have opportunities to seek foundation and corporate support. The application process becomes quite simple if the organization is proposed or dormant for a one-year period. Thus, United Serpents did more-or-less hibernate for one year; we have obtained a state charter and expect to receive non-profit status within the next two months.

This is not to say that United Serpents has now become structured administratively with accompanying officers and a board of directors. I sense that may evolve in due time, but that will be determined at future meetings. At the 1987 International Meeting of US (in Gloucester) the consensus of the group seemed to suggest that United Serpents continue to enjoy its loosely-conceived structure. "Area representatives" were designated (Tom Dibley for the United Kingdom; Ernst and Reinhild Wilzek for Europe; Craig Kridel for North America and other areas) to assist in the distribution of the newsletter. And it was generally agreed upon that US was for any of us-- not just serpentists but also keyed serpentists, aspiring serpentists, and those admirers of the instrument.

Now that major activities are scheduled for the upcoming months, the newsletter will be issued on a more regular basis. And I have decided to continue to underwrite the newsletter. Quite frankly, I would prefer to subsidize personally the xeroxing and postage rather than collect membership dues and feel the burden of a structured schedule.

Serpent Begins 1987 Papal Visit to Columbia, SC

While we will always be indebted to Canon Edme Guillaume and the Catholic Church, one modest gesture of retribution was made in September 1987 when the serpent was selected to perform the "Call to Service" for Pope John Paul II's Ecumenical Service in Columbia, South Carolina. Craig Kridel was asked by members of the planning committee to perform a short excerpt of Gregorian plainsong to begin the services for an audience of 70,000 people. One member of the committee, Professor Ann Dreher of the University of South Carolina Department of Theatre, was aware of the serpent's affiliation with the Catholic Church and felt this would be a most appropriate gesture-- for the serpent to play "before" the Pope. This did occur, however, quite literally. The serpent played, and the Pope arrived 45 minutes later (for security reasons). Yet, the serpent was heard by the masses and contributed greatly to the overall ambience of the event.