

The Newsletter for U S United Serpents

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Serpent Workshop Planned for August at Amherst Early Music Festival, USA

Christopher Monk will conduct a one-week workshop, August 4-10, 1991 at the Amherst Early Music Festival, Amherst College, Amherst, MA. The Amherst Festival has become the major summer meeting grounds for amateur and professional early musicians with approximately 40 faculty and 200 students participating each of the two weeks. The Festival will be preceded by the Early Brass Festival (August 2-4).

This event (unlike the last American event, the International Serpent Festival) will focus upon instruction and ensemble playing. I strongly encourage beginning and intermediate serpentists to attend. Participants of past workshops displayed the magic of Christopher's teaching: novices who at week's beginning could not play an octave concluded past workshops by performing large ensemble works; intermediates became adept as ensemble players; and advanced players by week's end were conquering the solo literature. I am convinced that a one week workshop equals 2-4 years of individual practice. There will be many opportunities for advanced play at the 1991 Workshop since 6 members of the American contingent to the Serpent Celebration have already expressed their intention to participate.

Amherst workshop fees and housing costs are \$280 for room and board and \$295 for tuition. Please write to US if you plan to attend or wish more information; Amherst registration materials will be sent in the late spring. This is the only North American event for quite some time; the next gathering is scheduled at Amherst for August 1994.

Serpent Celebration 1590-1990 by Christopher Monk

Serpent gatherings are no longer such a novelty but there is no doubt that something new emerges each time they happen. For example it was only 1986 when a dozen serpentists met at Amherst, MA, USA, for an extraordinary week of study, struggle and music-making. Who could believe that only four years later over fifty serpentists from eight countries and three continents would be willing and able to converge on rural England and London, some overcoming great personal difficulties to do so, to celebrate a birthday. One far flung player in the UK all but cried "liar!" when told how many would be taking part because he absolutely knew there were only half-a-dozen people in his country, let alone anywhere else, capable of playing a tune on the serpent. It wasn't just the numbers attending that impressed, but the individual commitment and determination to achieve acceptable musical standards on what is arguably the most difficult of all wind instruments. The whole week of July 7th- July 14th was a wonderful paradox of remarkably serious fun.

The central event of Serpent Celebration was a concert presented as a birthday party (or should that be the other way round?) at the prestigious London venue, St. John's, Smith Square. Friday the 13th was convenient for the indispensable players as well as having an appropriate ring. The setting of Auxerre, the home of Edme Guillaume, in France was the original goal. It proved too elusive. In the event this was as well when it emerged just how many were prepared to make long journeys by train and plane to take part on the day, from Bonn and Provence and the Scilly Isles for example. Anywhere else but London would have ruled them out to our great loss.

Sponsorship for anything but the most modest occasion is essential in these times. Even with the extraordinary generosity and good will of all fifty-eight serpent players who eventually took part the unavoidable expenses looked daunting. The sponsors who have serious money like the idea of symphony orchestras or choirs doing quite ordinary things much more than aiding the greatest assemblage of serpent players in the history of the world. "What's a serpent anyway?", they tend to say like others of the good and great.

Admittedly education in this respect is spreading. Take some straws in the wind. Not long ago a very famous ex-Lord Chancellor of Great Britain was to be seen dancing an impromptu jig in the Egyptian Room of the British Museum to the accompaniment of the London Serpent Trio. The Pope on his visit to South Carolina heard an assembly of thousands called to prayer with plainsong played by a serpent. If you go through customs at Gatwick Airport today you may meet one or other of two officers there who not only know what a serpent is but even view you in a friendly light for having one. Unfortunately Lord Chancellors, Popes and Customs Officers seldom dispense money for the arts. Were were fortunate to receive help from Sindall and Co., well established ophidophiles. There contribution and the clever and careful budgeting of the management firm Prelude made it possible for the birthday concert to take place as hoped, and to prove a hugely successful sellout.

The large number of serpents it was hoped to assemble was going to produce a sound that had not been heard before. Another anniversary being celebrated was the performance of Gossec's *Te Deum* on July 14th, 1790 with a wind band including fifty serpents, the greatest recorded assembly of serpent players hitherto. They had played in unison. For the Serpent Celebration even more than fifty were going to play in up to thirteen parts. One thing certain was that contra-bass sound would be needed. The Edinburgh Collection kindly made *The Anaconda* available. Since the Yorkshire brothers completed it in 1840 it was in any case invited to be an honoured guest on its one hundred and fiftieth birthday. However it was bound to need some help. So after over 750 hours of working time George came into existence. He first gave voice on St. George's day, hence the name, and is a giant church serpent standing a foot taller than the *Anaconda*. The *Anaconda* is held horizontally. George is stood vertically with the player looking through the second bend from the top. He is now the property of Dr. Philip Palmer of Richmond, Virginia. He kindly allowed his use for the workshop and concert, during which he played George himself before taking him to his new home.

Devising a programme for the concert which could include all the widely varying range of talent and experience to the maximum and make the long journeys and time sacrificed worthwhile was quite a challenge. It would have been impossible without a good attendance at the week long workshop in Stock Farm House, Churt where complex pieces could be rehearsed and some even polished. Twenty-seven players, including the tutors, took part in that and were joined intermittently by seven or eight others. This meant up to thirty-five could give a strong lead to the twenty or so who would just get one short rehearsal on the day.

The first half was designed for the most experienced players only. The original London Serpent Trio (Alan Lumsden, Christopher Monk, Andrew van der Beek) opened with a piece by Speer. They were joined in turn by Cliff Bevan and Phil Humphries, and the *Anaconda*, for our and five part pieces by Susato, Tcherenpkin, Seiber and Frescobaldi. Craig Kridel joined then for one in six parts by Ferrabosco. Claude Engli and John Weber together with George took part in the last two items in seven and eight parts by Hentzschel and Schubert. "*Marche Militaire*" made not only a good finale but an ear-opener of a wholly new sound that is worth exploring further-- the sound of a Serpent Band. Quite a discovery.

From there the second half moved into largely unexplored territory with over fifty serpents. Three pieces by Schmelzer for six trumpets made a start in which everyone could find somewhere to join in with little inhibition. The three lowest trumpets are asked for only two or three notes and the choral effect works for massed serpents anyway. Then came a truly ambitious piece, the thirteen part *Sonata con voce, Dulcis Jesu*, by Gabrieli. Eleven of these parts require a lot from the players and were taken by members of the workshop who had put in a hard week's work. The remaining two parts are alternating plainsong taken by the 'tutti' serpents divided into two equal choirs. St. Saens' *Tortoises and Elephant* came next. They have become almost statutory for serpent gatherings and are always much enjoyed. What was most noticeable this time was the number of players who did NOT chicken out when the *Elephant* moves amongst a terrifying number of sharps.

Simon Proctor's *Amherst Suite* is another piece that has become statutory. This occasion however was the first to use twenty-four players who had time to rehearse during the workshop. Two 'Worms' had to be called in to match such forces in their brilliant solo. They were so carried away with their success that they improvised their way into the grand finale. This was "*A Readers' Digest 1812 Tchaikowski Overture for serpents in eight parts*" arranged by



30 participants of the Stock Farm House Serpent Workshop

Clifford Bevan. The Czarist anthem at the end was taken by the 'tutti' serpents and sounded remarkably like "Happy Birthday," while the capacity audience enjoyed themselves emulating the cannon by bursting 400 balloons. No-one could have felt left out.

There is an excellent recording on cassette of the whole evening issued by Dog Rose Sound (26 Bell Lane, Ludlow, Shropshire SY8 1BN at 7 pounds inc. p.&p.). For a special reason it is to be hoped all friends of the serpent ('ophidophiles') will order copies. The sponsor who hoped to underwrite the expenses of recording at such a venue and the costly editing and publishing processes had to drop out at the last moment. Where almost any other engineers would have gone straight home Dog Rose Sound went ahead at their own expense to ensure a unique event did not go unrecorded professionally. A good many orders have already been received and met, but getting on for 200 more are needed before they will break even.

The "serpent workshop in a serpent workshop" at Stock Farm House, Churt was an essential ingredient of the Celebration. It would have been foolhardy in the extreme to undertake so ambitious a concert programme without time to explore what could be made to work with larger forces of serpents than had ever been tried out before. The week also discovered several players largely

inexperienced on serpents who turned into positive stars. One put in so much work that during a rehearsal her mouth- piece (wooden) actually exploded with a bang. It is admittedly difficult to say just what that proves. Above all else however the extra- ordinary friendliness and goodwill shown by everyone of mixed ages and nationalities without exception from start to finish created a special atmosphere of happy endeavour. It was a great deal more than just a group of eccentrics indulging themselves. As at all the previous workshops standards and expectations of what can be achieved rose quite dramatically.

Many people in England firmly believe that the county of Surrey, in which Churt lies, is completely paved over. Stock Farm House actually is among fruit farms and miles of hilly heathland often described as a miniature Scotland. Georgian farmhouses are fortunately quite generously designed so everything could just be fitted in, with the help of two outside workshops cleared for the occasion. The daily teaching sessions were intended to divide into Beginner Beginners, Beginners, Ambitious, Competent and Expert. Everyone was too modest to enter the last two categories so they turned into groups tutored by the five members of the London Serpent Trio. There were a couple of spare rooms in case of dissidents but there was never a suggestion they might be needed except for group and individual practice.

The weather stayed fine so the garden was well used too. A BBC interviewer particularly enjoyed discovering serpentists practising hard hidden under a 200 year old mulberry tree and another in a bower of hazelnut. Some massed rehearsals took place there but breezes too easily cause havoc. A neighbouring farmer very generously cleared everything out of his farm shop and provided indoor space where up to 35 serpents could (just) fit and rehearse tricky items like the Gabrieli and the 1812 Overture without interruptions from uncontrollable wind.

The neighbourhood is not at all used to this sort of thing but took it all in extremely good part. They rallied to provide bed and breakfast for the students on the workshop as well as transport for those who needed it. There was room at Stock Farm House to sleep the tutors and a housekeeper but no one else. Passers by did a double-take if they coincided with the rush hour of 30 or more figures carrying serpents on their way to or from the farm shop. The only complaint was gratifying in its own way. It came from a neighbour who was having improvements to his house. He said that when the massed serpent rehearsal began in the afternoon his two builders dropped work and slipped off to listen in comfort.

Thanks to Prelude the media paid suitable attention to proceedings. In the middle of the week the whole workshop went up to the London Zoo for a photo-call and open rehearsal. The Reptile House is not very suitable for such gatherings. The Elephant House was busy tracking elephants by satellite the other side of the world. So the Humming Bird Enclosure was made available. With extra players making numbers up to thirty-five or so it was possible to produce quite a sizeable hum. A charming young python, gleaming black and some ten foot long, came to perform for the cameras. At one point it untwined itself from the sitting players and dived inside a valuable Baudouin serpent. Fortunately it was persuaded to emerge before the instrument split. After that it got wind of a tasty squirrel and refused to pose any more. The best picture out of the session occupied much of the back page of the *Times* the following day. It showed Phil Palmer playing George against the background of a fountain with a wondering young tourist studying him pensively.

One way and another the Serpent Celebration achieved even more than could have been hoped. Chiefly it made a lot of new friends not only among serpentists the world over, but among members of the general public who discovered something to which they could relate with enjoyment. What on earth Edme Guillaume would have made of it goodness knows. I hope he might have felt pleased and flattered that he has given so much unexpected



John Weber, George, Clifford Bevan, Craig Kridel, The Anaconda, Andrew van der Beek

1991 Autumn Issue of the Newsletter for US

While the Newsletter has been primarily an annual publication, serpent activities seem numerous and fast-breaking enough to warrant a semi-annual schedule. With this decision goes a passionate plea for members to contribute articles, essays, musical discoveries, facts, performance information, announcements, and about anything else (pertaining to music) that seems as if it would be of interest to US. [The only exception to this open call is the submission of serpent puns. Someone else can initiate another newsletter for that purpose.]

The autumn issue will include information for purchasing the United Serpents teshirt and for ordering two new compositions for solo serpent by Simon Proctor and many new compositions for solo-ensemble serpents by Robert Steadman. Also, the time has finally arrived for US to establish a framework for collecting dues to offset the costs of postage.

Please send items for upcoming newsletters to US; P. O. Box 8915; Columbia, SC 29202; USA.