
*The Newsletter for U S
United Serpents*

**Number 7
late Autumn 1991
Editor: Craig Kridel**

**United Serpents
P. O. Box 8915
Columbia, SC 29202; USA**



**Christopher Monk
December 28, 1921-July 17, 1991**

Christopher Monk
by Clifford Bevan

Christopher Monk was one of that, alas, dwindling number of dedicated founding fathers of the early music movement. He both made and played the instruments of the ancient cornett family (not to be confused with the modern cornet). But the apogee of his achievement was undoubtedly the serpent, that sinuous and largest member of the family, which in former times graduated from accompanying hymns in church to the military band. Monk was a fine craftsman and player. But he retained a pleasantly whimsical—indeed almost iconoclastic—approach to his instruments, their history and to performance. Nevertheless in the hands of Monk and two like-minded colleagues, the reedy tones of the first serpent trio of modern times were to be heard in places as far apart in spirit as the chateaux of France, London Zoo and the American Deep South.

Christopher William Monk's parents were both missionaries and he was born in Delhi. After Twyford School and Repton he spent 14 months in hospital with osteomyelitis before continuing his education at University College school, Hampstead, and reading history at Lincoln College, Oxford, from 1940 to 1944. At this time he also studied trumpet with George Eskdale, principal with the London Symphony Orchestra. This experience came to affect the whole of his future life and work.

After Oxford he taught at Pocklington school, Yorkshire, and then moved to St Edmund's, Hindhead, Surrey, close to the base of the Dolmetsch family's historic performing and instrument-making activities at Haslemere. He soon succumbed to the lure of what was subsequently to be known as The Early Music Movement.

He developed skills as a craftsman and made early wind instruments himself, eventually settling at Churt, Surrey where he had his workshop. In 1955 he finished his first cornettino, a cross between a woodwind and brass instrument believed not to have been previously made since the 18th century. Soon afterwards he gave the first broadcast in the United Kingdom on the cornetto, a larger version of the cornettino. In 1961, by now an authority in his field, he contributed the chapter on "The Older Brass Instruments" to *Musical Instruments through the Ages*, edited by Anthony Baines.

Monk interested others in these early instruments and was able to give them the

chance to play them. By making cornettini from resin, he and Len Ward, one of his collaborators, produced them relatively cheaply, so that those of modest means could experience the satisfaction of playing early music on the right instruments.

But he became best known for his serpents. These were always made of traditional materials but he invested in modern machinery which enabled them to be produced at a reasonable price. During the 1980s he designed sackbuts, forerunner of the trombone, and natural trumpets (without valves) subsequently made by Frank Tomes, another collaborator.

The serpent, that most bizarre of lip-reed instruments, appealed to his sense of humour. In 1967, with Andrew van der Beek and Alan Lumsden, he appeared for the first time in public with The London Serpent Trio. This unique ensemble spread the awareness of its instrument throughout the United Kingdom, Europe, and, during three tours, the United States, where Monk was the dedicatee of the first International Serpent Festival held in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1989.

He himself was the driving force behind the Serpent Celebration held in London the following year marking the instrument's 400th anniversary. The climax was a remarkable concert in St John's, Smith Square, on July 13, 1990, in which 58 serpentists from all over the world participated.

A more tangible memorial remains in his portrait by June Mendoza, RA, exhibited at Mall Galleries, London, in 1986. Here Monk is seen relaxing as a country gentleman in the formal dress familiar from his appearances with the trio; his faithful companion in the picture is, of course, the inevitable serpent.

He is survived by his wife, Margaret, and their son and three daughters.

[published in *The Times*, Saturday, July 20 1991]

Christopher Monk
by Andrew van der Beek

Christopher Monk was one of the best-loved figures in the world of early music and a notable eccentric in an admittedly crowded field. More than anyone else he has been responsible for the restoration to our soundworld of the Renaissance cornett, the beauty of which ancient writers compared to that of a choirboy's voice; that one no longer

hears works such as the 1610 *Vespers* with anything other than Monteverdi's instrumentation is largely due to Monk's influence as a player, maker, scholar and enthusiast.

He read history at Oxford and studied the trumpet with George Eskdale. His first cornett was completed in 1955 while he was still a prep school teacher (he taught first at Pocklington in Yorkshire; then at St Edmund's, Hindhead), and the programme he made, with Brian Baker in April 1958, for the BBC Third Programme was the first ever broadcast of the instruments, which were then widely thought to be unplayable. He was a pioneer player of the virtuoso parts in Monteverdi's *Vespers*, taking part in performances organised by members of the Galpin Society in Brompton Oratory in the late fifties and one conducted by the undergraduate John Elliot Gardiner in Cambridge in 1964. This was the occasion when his 17th cornett exploded into two halves; the performance continued with the instrument held together by postage stamps. In 1968, with Len Ward, he devised a method of making cornetts of wood-filled resin; one soon learned not to refer to this material as "plastic" in his presence. These inexpensive instruments have been produced in their thousands and have done much to stimulate the instrument's current revival.

Christopher Monk's other main enthusiasm was for the cornett's slightly disreputable cousin, the serpent. His improbably-named London Serpent Trio performed widely in Europe and North America and attracted compositions from composers including Judith Weir and P.D.Q. Bach. Its success rested largely on the dry wit of the commentaries provided by Monk, who regardless of season or latitude invariably performed in an ancient Scottish morning coat of heavy tweed. The three "serpent festivals" in this country and America that he either organised or inspired, to which he invited "all known or suspected serpent-players", were a delightful mixture of academic conference and Hoffnung concert and hugely enjoyed by all participants (predictably, an earnest young critic from a magazine called *Early Music* was the only one who failed to get the joke). At the last of these, in July 1990 in St John's, Smith Square, he unveiled the only known contra-bass *serpent d'eglise*, which was to be one of his last instruments and an apt memorial.

Christopher's many friends throughout the world will miss his charming company, the elaborate courtesy accorded to all he had

dealings with, his uncomplaining tolerance of a series of misfortunes in his physical health (beginning with osteomyelitis at the age of 13), his impish sense of humour and delight in confounding bureaucracy. Once when he needed an American work permit at short notice, in the box marked "complexion" I was unable to dissuade him from answering "ruddy".

He revelled in his testimonial after wartime service in the merchant navy: "Cheerful company and a good plain cook in all weathers".

[published in *The Independent*, Saturday, July 20, 1991]

Christopher Monk: A Musical Celebration of his Life

In the next issue of the Newsletter, Philippa Lunn will report on the Musical Celebration held on Friday, September 27th at St. Alban's Church, Hindhead.

1992 Serpent Workshop at Amherst Early Music Festival, USA

The 1991 serpent workshop at the Amherst Early Music Festival has been postponed and rescheduled for August 10-16, 1992. Workshop information will be sent to North American serpentists in early 1992 and will be announced in the Spring 1992 Newsletter.

Future Column: Memories of Christopher

We ask for thoughts, stories, and anecdotes relating to Christopher Monk-- from the poignant to the comical.

Serpent News:

New Instruments:

** We are pleased to report that the Christopher Monk workshop is now under the direction of Jeremy and Naomi West and will continue building serpents.

** David Harding's new address is 56 Netherton Rd.; Appleton, Abingdon; Oxon. OX13 5JZ; United Kingdom.

Used Instruments:

** serpents: ??; none on the market

** ophicleides: "Guichard Brevete a Paris" 9 key, B flat; unsigned, French, 9 key, B flat; both are in good restorable condition; photos and prices on request from Robert E. Eliason; RR#3, Box 466; Lyme, NH 03768; USA

New Recordings:

** DuCaurroy, Missa pro defunctis by Ensemble Vocal Sagittarius, M. Laplenie director; Musifrance 2292-45607-2, Erato 2-45607-2; Bernard Fourtet, serpentist.

** Villancicos by les Saqueboutiers de Toulouse; Scalen'disc/Ariane 152; Bernard Fourtet, serpentist.

** Courtlye Musick cassette tape; Phil Humphries, serpentist; 5 pounds; 50 pence postage & packing in UK and 1 pound for outside of UK; send orders to: Courtlye Musick, 18A Lake Road, Hamworthy, Poole, Dorset, BH15 4LH, England.

Report of Past Workshops

France/Spain:

A serpent workshop was held on Feb 10 & 11, 1991 at the Conservatoire Supérieur de Musique de Lyon with Bernard Fourtet of Les Saqueboutiers de Toulouse serving as the instructor. The workshop was organized by the Département de Musique Ancienne (G. Geay, director) of the Conservatory and attracted six tuba and saxhorn players. Since only one participant had previously played the serpent, the lessons were oriented towards the fundamentals. Yet the sound of the instrument "first surprised and then seduced" the students, and their instruction culminated with the performance of "le Phenix," the famous four part bassoon concerto by Michel Corrette, at the end of the workshop. A concert was organized on Feb. 12 where Bernard Fourtet performed with harpsichord "La Monarca," a work by Falconieri (1650). All participants were quite enthusiastic to meet again, and another workshop was scheduled in Daroca (Zaragoza, Spain) during the 13th International Early Music Course, August 1991.

England:

Report on West Gallery Music Association Events, 1990

by Carl Willetts

This newly formed society followed up its successful inaugural meeting in April 1990 with two further events. In August we gathered in the Dorset village of Puddletown to record a Harvest Festival service in the parish church, followed by a harvest supper in the ancient barn at Abbotsbury. This was to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Thomas Hardy's birth and so was conducted in early 19th century costume in imitation of the original West Gallery Choir of Puddletown and "Mellstock" (vide *Under the Greenwood Tree*).

Four serpentists were present. Phil Humphries played a 19th century serpent kindly loaned by Christopher Monk along with other original church band instruments, the Hardy family violins and flute and clarinet from Puddletown West Gallery. Other serpent players were incognito: Harry Woodhouse on ophicleide, Carl Willetts on flute and David Townsend on fiddle, concertina and flute. David undertook the musical direction.

The event was recorded by BBC television and broadcast on September 23 & 24 as "Songs of Praise," a series of 35 minute religious programmes which has been running weekly for at least 30 years.

In November, we met again in Ironbridge, Shropshire, to record a tape of 19th century hymns. The recording was made by our friends from Dog Rose Records who have possibly heard too many serpents for one year! Most tracks included at least one serpent accompanying the bass singers and one funeral hymn from Sussex was played in four parts on trombone and three serpents (P. Humphries, C. Willetts and Ron Emmett).

We look forward to two events in 1991, a playing weekend in April and a one-day conference in November.

1992 Issues 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. Beginning with the 1992 edition Paul Schmidt will assume the editorship. Please send items for upcoming newsletters to US; P. O. Box 8915; Columbia, SC 29202; USA.

The next issue will include information for purchasing the United Serpents t-shirt 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. Details will be described in the spring 1992 issue.

Lastly, we wish to thank Nigel Nathan and Ernst Wilzek for serving as the EC distributors of the Newsletter.