

Serpent Newsletter

P.O. Box 954 Mundelein, Illinois 60060 USA

Newsletter for Serpent Enthusiasts

April 1, 1999

A Note from the Editor

First of all, I want to point out that our European representative, Nigel Nathan, has moved to the wonderfully windswept Cape Cornwall, which according to my map is second only to Land's End as the most western point in England. He writes that he is inspired to consider fashioning an Aeolean Serpent, which would certainly put the foghorns to shame. The upshot is that Nigel is continuing his serpent efforts, and will henceforth receive financial & editorial contributions, inquiries, etc; at the new address, phone and email listed in the *About the Organization* section of this newsletter.

Next, since the tardy release of the last issue, I have been forced to update some computer equipment. This brings with it the necessity of updating software, since my ancient DOS and Windows 3.x publishing software does not work properly with the new computer and its operating system. The new Win95 page layout software I purchased is getting its first workout with this issue of the newsletter. You may notice a number of small differences due to this change. Even as I write this, the software seems to have more bugs and glitches than any of the old stuff. *Sigh....*

Thanks to the contributions of a very few, since the plea for more funds in the last newsletter, there is enough money in the account to print and mail this issue of the newsletter. Then, we will be back to the same shaky status we were last September.

I have found, as a *bona fide* zealot, that most things I get passionate about end up costing me money. Lots of it. No end in sight. This is because I am in fact in love with my music and my other serious hobby, bicycling. Just as with family members, almost no effort or expense seems too great to enhance them or the collective enjoyment I have with them. It's things like this that make life great, and something, frankly, that a great number of people don't ever seem to have in their lives. So many live vicariously through others, and the enjoyment generated by others is as close as they will come.

We are the lucky ones, having professional or amateur involvement with music, arguably the greatest of the art forms, and the only one available to the masses that thrives on group participation. We are luckier still, in that we harbor an unconventional love for things offbeat, and we can find something like the serpent and its ilk worthwhile, in the face of the ignorance and apathy of so many.

Without all of the above, I certainly would not bother with many of the not-for-profit endeavors I seem destined to participate in. These include teaching students & adult groups about weird music and the instruments that make it, *pro bono publico* performances, writing for various publications, and last but not least, this newsletter. I hope that all newsletter recipients feel, one way or other, to one degree or other, the same about the serpent and its place in their musical lives.

We cannot afford to let these things die on the vine. Only through active participation do they bloom and become all they can be in rewarding us for our efforts. Only through participation do we meet and enjoy the company of others with the same peculiar passions. Only through these activities do we share our love with others, who might be inspired to take up similar interests and enhance both their lives and our own. I want to encourage all of you to consider taking your serpent or other instrument, getting out there and playing it with others, and attend some of the workshops, such as the Lacock Serpentarium or HBS Early Brass Festival.

And don't forget to support your local serpent newsletter.

Paul Schmidt

Where Serpents Gather

- Tubist and jazz serpentist extraordinaire Michel Godard was in London for the weekend of October 23-25, 1998 as part of the Brass Project which climaxed the London Jazz Festival. Unfortunately, this is the extent of the information available to the newsletter. If any readers attended this event and witnessed Michel's performance, please write it up and send to the newsletter for the next edition.
- Doug Yeo will give the world premiere of Norman Bolter's *Temptation* for serpent and string quartet during the International Trombone Festival, to be held at the Crane School of Music in Potsdam, New York, June 1-5, 1999. Norman Bolter is a trombonist with the Boston Symphony and a prolific composer and Doug has participated in the premieres of several of his works.
- Washington D.C. composer Gordon Bowie has completed a new work for Doug, for serpent and string orchestra called *Old Dances in New Shoes*. It will be premiered during the 1990-2000 season when Doug gives a recital of music written expressly for serpent solo during the 20th century. The program will include music of Bolter, Bowie, Cliff Bevan, Drake Mabry and others.
- Carle Kopecky writes about his ongoing serpent activities. Most amateur serpentists would love to find a suitable venue for keeping active and involved with the instrument, and Carle has succeeded at this. Several times a year he plays for educational programs, and contributes to performances of visiting musical groups at his museum. He also plays for English country dances, and he does not miss the local TubaChristmas (always in 18th century clothing). Carle also reported that he has located an alternate mouthpiece that has really helped him get the best out of his Harding serpent. The old E-flat tuba mouthpiece fits nicely into the crook and gives good control over about 3 octaves, down to pedal A-flat on the C instrument. He also gets a kick out of suddenly making French horn style fanfares above the staff in the middle of dances.
- This seems as good a time as any to encourage lonely serpentists to seek out their local recorder consort. There is lots of music for recorder groups of various sizes, and bass recorder music seems to be written with C serpents in mind. Another plus is that the bass member of the recorder family is profoundly weak, and many groups will probably welcome a qualified serpentist into their midst. The style of playing will teach the serpentist the techniques for performing at the instrument's best; this includes low volume playing of often supple passages, encouraging control and optimal tone color. Regular workouts with such ensembles can really help a serpentist master his horn. If in doubt about where to find such recorder groups, consult organizations such as The American Recorder Society (they will no doubt be able to

assist with organizations in other countries as well). Here are some contacts:

American Recorder Society
Box 631
Littleton, CO 80160
USA
email <recorder@compuserve.com>
email <74363.3365@compuserve.com>

Country Dance and Song Society of America
132 Main St.
P.O. Box 338
Haydenville, MA 01039
email <camp@cdss.org>

Society of Recorder Players (UK)
12 Woodburn Terrace
Edinburgh EH10 2SJ
Scotland
email <chairman@srp.org.uk>

- On November 15, 1998, Doug Yeo played serpent for a concert with the Connecticut Valley Chamber Orchestra. The program included Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, Beethoven's *Septet in E-flat major, Op.20*, and Simon Proctor's *Serpent Concerto*.

How I Came To Tangle With A Serpent

By Chris Gutteridge

About seven years ago I was stricken down by ME. Like most sufferers of this mysterious disease, I had always been extremely active, and one of my many interests was music. I played by ear on any instrument that came to hand, and in my mis-spent youth I was a frequenter of, and performer at, folk clubs.

As I began to recover from the first onslaught of ME I returned to music but found that, due to short term memory loss, I could no longer play by ear. Anything I knew before my illness was still there, but it was impossible to learn anything new. I decided to learn to read music properly, and started viola lessons with my daughter's violin teacher. As I recovered more and more, I reviewed our family's musical resources. We could muster a string quartet (older daughter on 1st violin, wife on 2nd violin, myself on viola, younger daughter on cello) and a wind trio (younger daughter on flute or piccolo, older daughter on clarinet, wife on alto sax). Clearly we were in need of another wind instrument.

For reasons of economy and because it avoided the use of keys or valves, I chose the trombone. After a couple of years of lessons I joined a local swing band as fourth trombone,

and the Norfolk Symphony Orchestra in the back desk of the violas. But still I felt something was missing from my life musically.

It was at this point that I developed a hankering for a serpent. I don't know quite where it came from, but I made some inquiries and traced two English makers – Christopher Monk and David Harding. Christopher Monk Workshops make instruments to a very high standard, but were beyond my reach financially. David Harding replied to my inquiry, saying that he had made serpents from fiberglass, but was in the process of producing a better quality instrument. He promised to let me know when he was ready to accept orders.

There the matter rested until I saw an article about an amateur bass trombone player, Dr. Roger Challoner Green, who had financed and produced a CD of bass trombone music by Douglas Yeo, using his life savings. I was impressed by his determination, and sent off for the CD, which was a revelation to me. The playing was superb. Roger wrote a book about the CD which I also bought, and in it there was reference to the fact that Douglas also played the serpent. Soon after this, David wrote to say that his new serpent was in production. I could wait no longer!

David's new serpent is based on a surviving French instrument of about 1750 and is made from a synthetic material with similar properties to hardwood. My daughter and I set off to Appleton near Oxford, where David lives, and came home with a serpent in the boot of the car.

After a few weeks of practice I made my first public appearance at a nearby Harvest Festival Concert where I accompanied my daughter as she played waltzes, hornpipes and reels on her fiddle. The performance was well received and caused quite a stir in the local press. Later, the Rector's wife phoned to say she read in the diocesan news that a serpent was required for a Georgian Advent service at Upton, near Norwich. This led me to meeting Francis Roads, who came to advise and assist with the music. Between the rehearsal and the service we played "I'll show you mine if you show me yours" and Francis was pleasantly surprised at how well my serpent played.

I've joined the West Gallery Music Association, and am currently working on reviving the King's Lynn Town Waites – a band of musicians who provided music for civic and other occasions from the 14th to the mid 18th centuries. All this is bringing me back to the world of folk music that I lost touch with a quarter of a century ago!

About the Organization

The Serpent Newsletter is distributed according to two regions, each with its own representative. All financial contributions and new subscriptions should be sent to the proper regional representative. Announcements, editorial items, comments and photographs should be sent to the editorial address.

*(United Kingdom &
European continent)*

Nigel Nathan
Boswedden House
Cape Cornwall
St. Just-in-Penwith
PENZANCE
Cornwall TR19 7NJ
England

Phone: +44-(0)1736-787683

Fax: +44-(0)1736-788733

email <serpents@boswedden.
free-online.co.uk>

*(USA, Canada, other
countries, Editor,
Treasurer)*

Paul Schmidt, editor
Dick George, treasurer

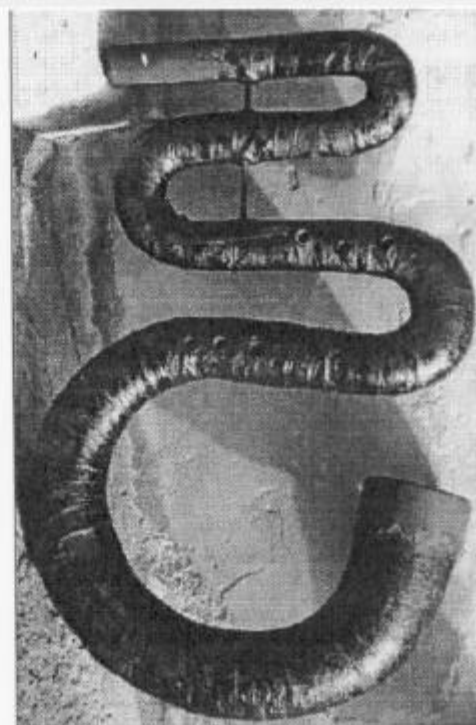
Serpent Newsletter
P.O. Box 954
Mundelein, IL 60060
USA

editorial fax: 847-356-7865

email <ocleide@wwa.com>
webpage:

www.wwa.com/~ocleide
or: shoga.wwa.com/~ocleide

Suggested *minimum* contribution for non-European subscribers is \$10 for 4 issues (2 years). Contact Nigel Nathan for European subscription rates. While the newsletter is supported by voluntary contributions, not formal subscriptions, those who manage to receive the newsletter without contributing are doing so entirely at the discretion of their regional representative.



Workshops

- Serpent players are a paradox: clever enough to master the complexities of one of the most recalcitrant instruments in musical history; stupid enough to want to do so in the first place. Does that explain the allure of the Lacock Serpentarium (reptiles are kept in an ophidarium, or more demotically, a snake-house)? The last of these biennial gatherings of serpent players and enthusiasts attracted serpentists from the farthest reaches of Christendom – Australia, Argentina, the USA – and BBC radio 3 sent a team to cover the event.

The London Serpent Trio – Phil Humphries, Cliff Bevan and Andrew van der Beek – invite all known or suspected serpent players to the Wiltshire village of Lacock for a musical weekend this May. Total beginners and players of other low brass instruments will be offered a warm welcome. The program will include coaching at all levels, playing in small groups and the ritual performance of some of the large scale pieces that have been written for such occasions. Informality will be the watchword; no serpentarium would be worthy of the name that did not allow scope for arbitrary and spontaneous happenings. All the playing and eating will take place at Cantax House, which dates from the reign of Queen Anne and was once the vicarage. There is a well worn path to the oldest of village pubs, The George. The serpentarium is as much a social as a musical event and the general aim is to stimulate enthusiasm for the instrument.

The serpentarium starts at 6PM on Friday May 21 and finishes at the same time on Sunday May 23. The fee of £25 deposit plus a further £50 on arrival includes full board, but not lodging. There is an ample supply of bed and breakfast places in the village, or you can pitch a tent in the orchard (this option is free). In previous years discounts have been meted out with alacrity bordering on recklessness on grounds of age, youth, ill health or idleness. Ask.

Send deposit or make inquiries to: Andrew van der Beek, Cantax House, Lacock, Chippenham SN15 2JZ, England. Phone & fax are +44-(0) 1249-730468.

- Ophios at the BTS

The 1998 British Trombone Society's [BTS] annual festival (its 13th), held at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, next to London's Barbican Centre, was entitled *Versatility*. True to its theme we had a wonderful variety of musical offerings, which included two of particular interest to ophiophiles.

Tom Winthorpe presented a recital *Sam and the Sleeping Beauty*, being the story of the ophicleide which lay forgotten

and unnoticed in a store room at Covent Garden Opera House for almost 100 years. On its rediscovery three years ago, it quickly became apparent that this instrument is of major importance for two reasons: one is the superb condition in which it has survived and the other is its links to the virtuoso Samuel Hughes.

Tom told Sam's story, interspersed with the actual solos that Sam played, to give a fascinating insight into the instrument and the man who played it.

Those of you who were at Lacock in May 1995 will remember Tom from the afternoon when he, Alan Lumsden and Cliff Bevan regaled us with ophicleide trios [in the garden behind The George pub].

The original publicity for the BTS festival had advertised the London Serpent Trio as performers, but sadly they could not make it. However, Phil Humphries persuaded the rest of the Mellstock Band along to take their place. They afforded a complete contrast to the rest of the day, giving the audience a chance to hear and see yet other facets of the trombonist's versatility – serpent and vocals, no less.

Submitted by Nigel Nathan

- The 3rd Festival of Village Carols held by the Village Carols and the West Gallery Music Association in Grenoside, Sheffield (England) was held on November 28, 1998. Serpentist Stephen Turner was able to contribute to the event, and it was a good thing, since the band was light on the bass until mass reinforcements arrived later on. Serpent participation in this event over past years is recorded below, and mathematicians and scientists will have little trouble processing the figures:

1st Festival	1994	3 serpents
2nd Festival	1996	2 serpents
3rd Festival	1998	1 serpent

As the intention is to hold the 4th Festival in the Cutler's Hall in Sheffield in November/December 2000 as a Millenium event, one (or no!) serpent will not do. Please make notes in your diary or cut notches in the appropriate place, and plan to come along. Contact Nigel Nathan for more information.

Submitted by Stephen Turner

- The Historic Brass Society will present the 15th annual Early Brass Festival from Friday August 13 through Sunday the 15th, at the Department of Music, University of California at Berkeley (this is the same festival often held at Amherst, Massachusetts). A tentative list of scholars and

performers includes Paul Avril, Alfred Buchler, Richard Cheetham, Gil Cline, Michael Collver, Trevor Herbert, Keith Polk, Herb Myers, Rick Seraphinoff, The Whole Noyse, and others. The festival will consist of lectures, informal early brass playing sessions, concerts, discussion sessions, instrument maker's exhibition and of course the pizza party. Note that this year housing will not be available in campus dorms, however a limited number of rooms are available at faculty clubs, and there are local hotels (such as the Hotel Durant, phone 510-845-8981). Registration is \$30 for current HBS members or \$60 for non-members. Send checks payable to Historic Brass Society, 148 West 23rd Street #2A, New York NY 10011. Phone or fax for more information 212-627-3820, or email <jjn@research.att.com> . Bargain notice: HBS membership is only \$25, you do the math!



*Hates rough roads, strong winds
and "blowouts"*

Getting Serpents

Here is the list of Serpent makers who have made themselves known to us. In the case of Monk and Harding instruments, there are numerous dealers who are able to order from the makers, and might even have some in stock. All four makers will also deal directly with individual customers.

Christopher Monk Instruments (Jeremy West)
Workshop 4
30-32 Devonshire Road
Forest Hill
London SE23 3SR
England

phone & fax: +44-(0)1812-916900
webpage: www.pavilion.co.uk/paulnieman/CMI.html

David Harding
56 Netherton Road
Appleton
ABINGDON
Oxon. OX13 5JZ
England

phone: +44-(0)1865-863673

Robb Stewart Brass Instruments
140 E. Santa Clara St. #18
Arcadia, CA 91006
USA

Phone: 818-447-1904
(*ophicleides, metal serpents, bass horns*)

Derek Farnell
82 Crumpsall Lane
Manchester M8 5SG
England

Phone: +44-(0)161-740-7778
(*ophicleides, serpents*)

More Exciting News

- In the April 1998 issue of this newsletter, there was an item about Stewart Bunyan's new Monk serpent and his activities with it. This was in error – the person described was Margaret Bunyan, Stewart's wife. Also, she is in the Grenadier Guards Band, while Stewart is in the Scots Guards Band. Sorry for the mixup!

- A recent presentation of Masterpiece Theatre was titled *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and during the production there appeared a small band which included a serpent. Can any of you readers help identify the player? Please respond to the editorial address.

- The recent Berkshire Eagle article *A Musical Serpent Joins the BSO*, by Andrew Pincus, now appears in its entirety on Doug Yeo's webpage at <http://www.yeodoug.com>. Also included are some new photos from Doug's lecture-recital at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and an excellent photo of Doug holding four different sizes of serpent, including the soprano "worm", tenor, bass, and contrabass anaconda "George". This picture is also linked to an even larger, high resolution version for those interested in seeing the instruments close-up.

- Randy Cabell mentioned his amateur serpent building adventure of years ago. He built what could pass for a sewer horn, but did have the sound of a serpent, using straight sections of plastic tubing or various lengths, an old sink trap, plus an old tuba mouthpiece on the blowing end. Apparently it did not sound too bad. Perhaps others amongst our readership will contribute short stories about successful or failed attempts to build their own serpent. Don't be shy!

- Albert Rice, of the American Musical Instrument Society, writes to inform you that the Kenneth G. Fiske Musical Instrument Museum, Claremont California, is the home of multiple serpents. The museum staff are planning to increase their holdings of brasses this year. Their webpage is <http://cuc.claremont.edu/fiske>

- David Guion of Chicago, cataloger for the John Marshall Law School Library, has contributed selected bits from an article that appeared in *American Musical Journal* No. 1 (March 1835, page 94). It is headed *Park Theatre*. "...On the 24th ultimo Mr. Young was announced at the Park Theatre to perform a concerto for the first time in America, on the keyed serpent..." "...The instrument which Mr. Young professes is, in reference to a military band, exactly what the double bass is to that of an orchestra. The serpent is the last instrument in the world we wish to hear figuring in a concerto within doors. Mr. Young really plays beautifully...." "...If Mr. Young adds himself to this triumvirate (trumpeters Norton and Gambati and trombonist Cioffi) next season, we may fairly expect that New York will

be blown away." [editorial note: This seems similar to another quote, one I have never actually seen in writing, which refers to a "keyed ophicleide" as being "the last instrument we wish to hear played indoors". *Hmmm*]

- Jeff Nussbaum reports that he and Trevor Herbert ganged up on Doug Yeo and grilled him for personal information a few weeks ago. Look for the interview in the next issue of The Historic Brass Society Newsletter.

- Cliff Bevan sent a copy of the magazine *Early Music Today*, February/march 1999, Volume 7 No.1, which features a two page article *Handling Serpents*. The article is written by Cliff (very sneaky) and is a nice, concise review of serpent history and its place in the contemporary musical scene. It features what seems to be the long lost photo taken at the first Lacock Serpentarium in 1995, where the combatants posed in loosely scattered formation on a grassy tennis court adjacent to Andrew van der Beeks house, looking like a band of grim reapers from *The Seventh Seal*. It is among the great serpent pictures, and your faithful editor will have to see about including it on either the Serpent Website or the next newsletter (or both). Are you listening Cliff & Andrew?

- Several of you have asked about whether there isn't an easier way to get copies of sheet music from the 1800s, especially band music from America. There were lots of band books, and no doubt they are in the Library of Congress, but access to them is difficult for people who don't live near Washington D.C., and the LOC's photoduplication service is slow and expensive. It occurs to your editor that some other readers might already have much of this stuff in their personal collections, and might be willing to share with other enthusiasts. If this sounds like it might be you, please drop a note to the editorial address!

- Last, but not least, there is the exciting news that the Serpent Player's Famous Texas Chili recipe now appears on the Serpent Website. This is a thick and robust, spicy but not gonna make you sorry kind of chili, with a batch size that will feed 6-8 persons. Don't forget the also famous batches of spherical inebriation one can make by visiting the website and clicking on the Rum Balls link. The URL of the website is <http://www.wwa.com/~ocleide>.

