

Serpent Newsletter

P.O. Box 954 Mundelein, Illinois 60060 USA

Newsletter for Serpent Enthusiasts

September 27, 1999

A Note from the Editor

This issue is being assembled while the eastern coast of the US is being hit by a major storm system, with two or three hurricane names associated with it. There are many thousands people who have lost homes and property, and many more who have had personal emergencies and inconvenience associated with the weather. I know that some early musicians, including readers of this newsletter, are among these. I know firsthand the impact of severe acts of nature, and I got off lightly. I know that I speak for the readership when I extend the hope that these individuals will also be able to look back and consider themselves lucky by comparison. Thanks also to those contributors who had to struggle with the weather situation, and still managed to get their material to me.

I read a very interesting book which I feel compelled to recommend. It's called *The Year 1000*, by history writer Robert Lacey, and is subtitled *What life was like at the turn of the first millennium: An Englishman's world*. It's a real eye opener in many ways, and is stuffed full of tidbits that will have you bringing them up to friends.
ISBN 0-316-55840-0

I don't have much else to say, except to remind you that the funds are very low. Since the last newsletter, only three contributions have come in. I would like to keep the newsletter coming twice a year, but this can only happen if more money comes in. Please give it due consideration.

Paul Schmidt

Workshops

• Report on the Lacock Serpentarium

Starting on Friday, May 21st and ending the evening of the 23rd, the London Serpent Trio's biennial gathering for serpent enthusiasts went off exactly as planned. Which is to say, chaos and informality prevailed; spontaneous happenings were the norm. Most participants arrived Friday night and were immediately called upon to do the seemingly impossible, namely making a bunch of recalcitrant instruments play together in tune. After this ice breaker reading session, those still on their feet adjourned to the next door pub.

Saturday followed the loose script of play-formal-large-ensemble-pieces, eat, play-small-ensemble-pieces, goof around, eat, meet-in-every-available-room-as-duets-and-trios until the urge for a pint brought an end to things. The large ensemble session was held in the vast adjoining topiary garden, shielded from the cool breeze by the tall hedges as the zephyrs dispersed all the bad notes and left the good ones ringing in our ears. If only yours truly did not have to deal with high parts in the wrong clef....sigh.

Sunday was dedicated more or less to working up a few large scale pieces in the garden, eating and drinking. Trombonist turned new serpentist (and a quick study at that) Michelle Lomas joined members of the London Serpent Trio in playing an operatic selection for trombones & cimbasso, with Andrew van der Beek doing the honors on the recently acquired replica cimbasso (this example following the 'bass horn as cimbasso' theory.) Sunday also brought a visit from serpent maker Keith Rogers of Christopher Monk Instruments in London. Keith showed examples of the latest refinement to the standard Monk church style instrument, which has some noticeable improvements in intonation over the previous models.

This year's participants were LST members Cliff Bevan, Andrew van der Beek and Phil Humphries, plus Murray Campbell, Christopher Baines, Michelle Lomas, Tom Fox,

Nigel Nathan, John Weber, Martin Brett, Tom Dibley, Paul Schmidt, Wiktor Bohdanovicz, Chris Gutteridge, Stephen Andre and Simon de Chadwick. Non-combatants included Patsy Campbell, Sarah Kaplin and Anya Spackman Bohdanovicz.

Total beginners were given a rare opportunity for a jump start, occasional players were provided a recharge and experienced serpentists got to coast somewhat until time came to sample brews at The George pub.

- Report on the Early Brass Festival 1999

The Historic Brass Society hosted their 15th annual Early Brass Festival on August 13-15. This year the event was held at University of California, Berkeley, continuing the policy of alternating the Amherst location with other venues around the states. This was the first time that the event was held anywhere in the western part of the country, and participants understandably varied somewhat from the 'normal' crowd.

On Friday the 15th, most participants arrived in the afternoon and dispersed into groups according to type of instrument for playing sessions. This was a very informal evening and no other events took place.

On Saturday morning, after the HBS Board of Directors meeting, participants met in Morrison Hall's Elkus Room (a small auditorium) to hear three consecutive lectures. First, Herbert Myers presented *Evidence of the Emerging Trombone in the Late 15th Century*, which included views of paintings that show acceptably accurate representations of trombones. Based on these depictions, he explored whether the pictorial evidence clearly shows trombones as opposed to similar looking slide trumpets. Most or all of the 15th century depictions are obviously unclear on which instrument is being represented. Next, Keith Polk gave *The Trombone and the International (Professional) Repertory in the Late 15th Century*. He argued that professional instrumentalists in city employment were better musicians than those in the employ of the church, and were overall better than even the vocalists; interesting in that the players were required to have vocal training prior to receiving training on their instruments. His main effort was a discussion of those professionals and the level of their repertory. To wrap up the morning lecture session, Daniel Hartz gave *Abt Vogler on the Horn Parts in Peter Winter's Symphony in D minor*. This was an exploration of the written analysis of Winter's piece by his teacher Vogler, with added comments by Hartz, making an interesting how & how not to lesson on writing for the horn in a symphonic context.

The late morning was used for informal playing sessions. The cornett & sackbut group consisted of Dave Topham, Oram Stringer, Janet Finkbeiner, Bill Mathews and Robert Dawson

on cornetts, with Bob Cronin on sackbut and Paul Schmidt on serpent. Lunch followed for most participants, while the HBS Board of Advisors held their meeting.

After lunch, Trevor Herbert gave a witty history lesson titled *God's Perfect Minstrels: The Brass Bands of the Early Salvation Army*. Following this was a lecture/symposium on the natural horn, consisting of three contiguous lecture/demonstrations; Thomas Hiebert's *Anton Joseph Hampel and Hand-Stopping: Development and Paths of Dissemination* with examples performed by Jeff Snedeker and Richard Seraphinoff, Seraphinoff's & Snedeker's *Natural Horn Pedagogy: The 19th Century French School and Today*. More group playing sessions followed, after which time some participants adjourned for dinner while others continued to play. In the early evening, the Sacramento group *El Dorado Brass Band of Old Sacramento* (also known as *The Band of the 5th California Volunteer Infantry Regiment, U.S.A.*) gave an outdoor concert; this was marred somewhat by the fact that the front of Morrison Hall is also apparently a major path for pedestrians to get from one place to another on campus, and the comings and goings from the facing entrance of Hertz Concert Hall, which seemed to have a wedding party going on. After the band finished, the participants and the members of the brass band went back indoors to the Elkus Room for a concert by *The Whole Noyse*, and ensemble of cornetts, sackbuts, and curtal. Both programs were well done and enjoyable. Finally, everyone walked to the nearby record shop/coffee salon *Musical Offering* for the traditional pizza & beer social.

Sunday morning opened with Alfred Buchler's lecture *Horns and Trumpets: Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean*. He presented 11th and 12th century examples of horns and trumpets in illustrations and some of his thoughts on accuracy in their depictions. Next, Kate van Orden talked about *Early Military Trumpeters: Scoundrels or Spies?*. She humorously described the employment during the Renaissance of trumpet players in the cavalry, and what they did besides play the trumpet. Many were well educated and had positions of command among the troops, and were also used to spy on the enemy camp; here they acted as heralds and had leave to enter the enemy camp to deliver messages, but were able to take an educated look around in the process. Richard Cheetham followed this with his *Ministriles en el Coro: Concerted Masses in Sixteenth Century Cordoba*. This dealt with the hiring practices by the Spanish church of their instrumentalists, and also covered their working conditions, duties, pay and performance practices.

There followed the annual HBS Membership Meeting, where the major topic was the possibility of offering an electronic version, either via web page or CD-ROM, of the society's publications. After lunch, the various groups got together one more time for pre-concert preparation, and the final gala festival concert followed.

The concert opened with trumpet fanfares performed by a group of five natural trumpets. Next, three natural horn players performed two movements from A. Reicha's *Trios*, Op. 82, "*Tritonus*" and "*contrepont double a' l'octave*". This was followed by the Vivaldi *Concerto for Two Trumpets*, performed on natural instruments plus harpsichord.

The cornett & sackbut band played next, performing Coporario's *Passa Madonna* and Morley's *Phillis I Fair Would Die Now*. The group, somewhat different from the original Friday afternoon bunch, consisted of Oram Stringer, Dave Topham, Harry Bernstein and Janet Finkbeiner, cornetts, plus Bob Cronin on sackbut and Paul Schmidt on serpent. A few festival participants who were eager to leave early due to transportation issues, stayed just long enough to hear this ensemble on account of desiring to experience the dulcet tones of the serpent.

Next, Jeff Snedeker, Richard Seraphinoff and Viola Roth performed three movements of Dauprat's *Grand Trio* Op. 26 on natural horns. Two natural trumpeters next played Franceschini's *Sonata in D* (1680), followed by four movements from Reicha's *Trios* Op. 93, performed by two natural horns and baroque bassoon. The concert concluded with a mini-concert from the students of Humboldt College, calling themselves Brass Consort von Humboldt. They played Schein's *Intrada*, Braun's *Canzonato* and Franck's *Intrada*, *Pavane*, *Intrada III*.

There were some glitches in the organization of the weekend's events, but considering the new location and lots of first time participants, it came off quite well. The weather was clear, sunny and comfortable the whole time, making up for the university's constantly changing parking rules.



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.

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Travels with "George": An Anaconda Odyssey

by Matthew Bettenson

I first met George in embryo at the Christopher Monk Workshops. Seven years ago, having to take in a military serpent for a small repair I was given an enthusiastic tour of the workshop where a great pile of woodblocks with strange incised curves was identified as patterns for a contrabass serpent.

Having stretched my finances to buy the "Pretty" military, there was no question of getting one so I left it at that. But three years later a legacy came my way – the exact amount for a contrabass – it HAD to be!

After I had reassured Keith Rogers and Jeremy West that I was not joking they set to work and at the Lacock Serpent-

arium of '95 Keith produced a bag with some sections which he assembled. Until then I had no real idea of how large it was going to be and was somewhat daunted, to put it mildly!

When the woodwork was nearing completion I was invited to the workshop for a fitting. As I had specified having a stand made so I could play standing, the curve of the crook had to place the mouthpiece so I could see through George's curves, the keys were to reach to my hand position, and the stand had to be built for my height – a contrabass is a highly customized instrument.

As yet, no idea of the sound – or if I could make it. Summer '96 – a phone call came.... "George is ready". As I was in the middle of a very busy summer season performing all over southern England I resisted temptation and offered it on loan to Andrew van der Beek for the summer, in return for which I requested a fingering chart as Christopher Monk had not left one when completed the first 'George'.

The Early Music Exhibition at the Royal College of Music saw the instrument's first public appearance, and my first sight of the completed work. Standing at the top of the stairs in the entrance hall it looked magnificent. My first attempt at playing produced a horrible blast, but in the acoustic the reverberation was VERY impressive.

After the show was over the task of learning to play began. It was quickly apparent that, compared with the military serpent, intonation was less secure in some areas, so hearing the notes in the head before blowing was vital, but on the plus side the ability to play *ppp* was amazing, and the *ff*'s were spectacular!

I had specified that keys would be single action, opening holes when pressed instead of closing them as on the first instrument made (by Monk, i.e; the 'George' that was recently played by Doug Yeo.) This simplified construction and made for more attractive keywork. I fitted shims under the finger plates so the pads lifted to the point beyond which increased opening made no difference to the sound. This made for a quick and clatter-free action.

Next spring was time to 'go public'. My main activity is touring with a 'One Man Band' show with an assortment of wind instruments played with prepared backing tapes. George comes in as a spectacular finale with a regular "Wow!" from the audience as he emerges from his travelling bag.

I also play with a recorder orchestra giving a welcome bass balance to the rather shrill ensemble. West Gallery music is a natural home for serpents and I play regularly with the Thomas Clark Quire in the Kent area with the contrabass being used for rousing last verses or lugubrious funeral ditties. The bass section of the choir greatly appreciates the reinforcement this provides!

If I had some doubts when I first commissioned George, the reality has exceeded my highest hopes. The sensitivity, tone and volume range combine to make an instrument that is a joy to own and play.

P.S. Why 'George'? Christopher Monk and the first team found themselves calling their growing creation by that name. Nobody remembers who used it first, but it stuck and the second team found themselves doing the same. All I can say is, it suits him perfectly. *(Christopher used to say that the original 'George' was so named because he came to life on St. George's day, 1989... whether 'came to life' refers to the process of building or the first blow of the completed instrument is unclear. Matthew's instrument is commonly called 'George II' in the serpent community, to contrast it with the first example. [Ed.]*

The Ophicleide

The Ophicleide, like mortal sin,
Was fostered by the serpent.
It's pitch was vague; its tone was dim;
It's timbre, rude and burpant.

Composers, in a secret vote,
Declared its sound non grata;
And that's why Wagner never wrote
An Ophicleide Sonata.

Thus spurned, it soon became defunct,
To gross neglect succumbing;
A few were pawned, but most were junked
Or used for indoor plumbing.

And so this ill wind, badly blown,
Has now completely vanished:
I nominate the saxophone
To be the next one banished.

Farewell, offensive Ophicleide,
Your epitaph is chiseled:
"I died of ophicleidicide:
I tried, alas, but fizzled!"

The above poem was submitted by an individual who's name I have misplaced. I apologize in advance for this sloppiness; if the author will kindly resubmit their name I will print it in the next issue. [Ed.]

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*)

Where Serpents Gather

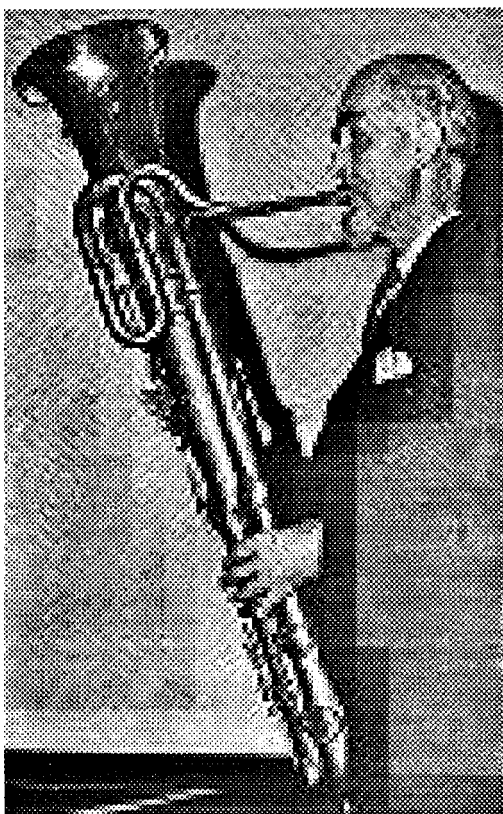
- The annual Memorial Day weekend get-together of the Richmond, Virginia/Washington, D.C. serpent lovers took place on May 29, 1999, at the home of Connie Palmer near Richmond. Quartets, trios, and duets of serpents and Renaissance instruments began in early afternoon and stretched into the evening after a dinner prepared by Connie Palmer and Tra Wagenknecht. In attendance were Bob Pallansche, serpentist, and Merrilllee Pallansche, storyteller, of Falls Church, Virginia; Robert Wagenknecht playing serpent and sackbut, and Tra Wagenknecht on serpent and tenor kortholt, of Chesterfield County, Virginia; Connie Palmer, serpentist and hostess, of Henrico County, Virginia; and Rick and Iris Schwartz of Colonial Heights, Virginia, playing alto shawm and soprano recorder respectively. We missed the company of those who couldn't attend, including Lloyd and Doris Farrar, members of our original group, who have moved to Tennessee.

Submitted by Therese Wagenknecht

- Donald Beyer writes that besides his playing oboe with the eclectic *South Hill Bones* (9 trombones, 4 trumpets, cello, piano, electric bass, drumset and Donald....Bach's *Cantata 156* was mentioned as an example of what they do), he has managed to fit in some serpent work, including plain-chant on Good Friday and infiltration of the local TubaChristmas. Donald is also quite active in his sponsorship of trombone & tuba competitions, such as the Donald Beyer event in Budepest, Hungary at the Liszt Academy.

- Sydney Hemsley reports that he has been active with his Monk military serpent, marching with the Exmouth Town Concert & Military Band. A recent performance was the annual U.S. Navy 'D' Day Memorial Service at Phear Park, Exmouth, Devon in England. Held on May 30, the event drew a fair number of veterans and their friends & families, who take advantage of the opportunity to renew contacts with people and places associated with their WWII experiences. The serpent was the subject of attention among many visitors, particularly among American vets. The photo send by Sydney shows him in the second row, right behind the guy with a bass drum and leopard skin set of 'tie and tails'. Guess it's fitting to have the dangerous animals lead the parade.

- Producer Donna Cressman-Dubois of the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) contacted this newsletter looking for a serpentist to feature in a planned radio program dedicated in part to the instrument. She also referenced the Serpent Website and through it decided to contact Doug Yeo. Now Doug writes that he has agreed to participate in the program by way of the studios of public radio station WBUR in Boston. The show is called *In Performance*, and is the premier concert program on CBC Radio Two, heard throughout Canada and the northern states. The show includes a question & answer segment, and a caller



reportedly asked "Does anyone still pay the serpent?", hence the upcoming feature. Doug expects to talk with host Eric Friesen for the better part of 20 minutes, then play selections that highlight both the beauty and the technique possible on the serpent. The show will air between 8 and 10 PM Eastern Standard Time on Tuesday, September 28, and the serpent segment will be the climax of the program and accordingly located at the end of the time slot, around 9:30. If your radio reception does not include CBC broadcasts, you can 'tune in' using the internet and a computer equipped with a sound card. Send your web browser to and click on the "Radio Two Live" icon at the top of the site. Your RealAudio player should come up and you will hear the current programming.

More Exiting News

- The news just came in that there is a webpage devoted to the ophicleide. The URL is www.capella.dur.ac.uk/doug/ophicleide.html
- One of our friends in England sent in an alert about a humorous webpage dedicated to the "Hosaphone". This is a mock-FAQ page, being a parody of the ubiquitous FAQs seen everywhere in the net. FAQ, for the uninitiated, stands for Frequently Asked Questions, and many are earnest attempts to be overly scholarly about mundane things. This is exploited fully by the authors, and they turn the simple garden hose & kitchen funnel instrument into quite a hoot, so to speak. Send your web browser to www.roth-music.com/hosaphone-faq.html
- While on the subject of webpages, here is one that deals with things contra-bass. Look at www.contrabass.com/pages/c-discog.html for a discography.
- Webivore, a service that locates and compiles educational web sites for use by students and educators, has selected the Serpent Website as a featured web location. Their synopsis opens with "A comprehensive look at an unusual bass instrument from the past. Despite the awkwardness and obscurity of the serpent, the lucid writing style of this presentation will convince readers of the beauty of the instrument." The service seems to charge for access to their site, but if you are interested in what else they offer, try www.webivore.com (classroom) or www.webivore.com/wks (college level).
- Susan Smith, a professor of geography at the University of Edinburgh is writing a biography of Christopher Monk. She is petitioning the readership of publications such as the Historic Brass Society Journal and the Serpent Newsletter for

information and help on the project. If you have any personal information, anecdotes, documents, etc; that you think might be useful, please contact her at: Professor Susan Smith, Geography, Univ. of Edinburgh, Drummond St., Edinburgh EH8 9XP, or email <SJS@geo.ed.ac.uk>, or phone 0131-650-2535.

- Robert Steadman, composer of many works for serpent, wishes you to know about his website. He also adds that some of the serpent pieces, including *Serpent Sonata*, *Serpent Concerto* and *Three Little Maids from School* have been removed from his catalog. www.angelfire.com/id/robertsteadman.html

• David Harding's new model serpent is now available. Quite different from his previous fiberglass instrument, this one is made from closed cell structural foam resin, painted black with red interior in the bell section. It is in the French style, without keys, and has a brass bocal/crook, brass fitting for the bocal receiver, and plastic resin mouthpiece. It is a copy of a museum example and provides an interesting option when looking for an inexpensive instrument. An example was on hand at the Lacock Serpentarium, and its owner allowed free access to interested players for testing. Contact the maker at the address listed in the *Getting Serpents* section of this newsletter.

- Composer Simon Proctor has entered the information age and can now be reached by email. <simonproctor@tinyonline.co.uk>

• Early brass composer/arranger/publisher Randy Cabell, having just returned home after fleeing the hurricane in South Carolina, writes about a new maker of reproduction brass instruments. Bill Deiss, apparently a Civil War re-enactment enthusiast, got his start with the help of brass maker Robb Stewart, and set up shop in making B-flat soprano, E-flat soprano and E-flat alto over-the-shoulder saxhorns. Randy is very pleased with the soprano he bought, and says that delivery was about 90 days and quite reasonable cost-wise. Be aware that Bill is often quite busy on the road and some customers have had to wait a while to establish contact. Bill A. Deiss, 109 Bushcreek Drive, Huntsville, AL 35824, phone 256-461-8394, email <vintage@skywizard.com>

- New serpentist Paul Sherman asks that players in the western and central New York areas contact him about sharing areas and meeting for fun playing sessions. Write to Paul Sherman, 1020 State Route 176, Fulton, NY 13069, or email <PJSherman@juno.com>

• A letter was received from an individual interested in borrowing a serpent for a dramatic production. If you are able to provide one, contact Lynn Earl Sconyers, P.O. Box 5142, Tacoma, WA 98415-0142.