

# HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

## Serpent

Since our last dispatches many events and activities have transpired within the serpent world. We were most pleased with the serpent's inclusion at the 1992 ITEC and greatly appreciate Skip Gray's courage in scheduling such an event sight unseen. The intent of the clinic was to present an overview of the serpent and to portray the instrument within its varied musical settings. Audio, video, and photographic presentations were coupled with the performance of compositions by Handel, Josquin, Seiber, and West Gallery Music.

The major themes of the session were twofold: 1) the serpent blends into an ensemble "at the expense of its own individual timbre" and is actually meant not to be heard by itself (this was a rather perplexing notion to present when in fact all in attendance were there to hear a serpent) and 2) the natural partners of the serpent include bassoon or voices and not other brass instruments. Some misconceptions were set straight—that a serpent cannot be mis-fingered (it can) and that a serpent is to be blown forcefully (only on occasion). Towards the conclusion of the session participants were invited to come forward and blow a harmonic series on the serpent. Those who gently blew a controlled airstream into the instrument were rewarded with a beautiful horn-sounding tone that easily passed through the various partials. And those who chose to display their low blasts received a few nasty looks and many ugly sounds. The moral of the session was that the serpent behaves as it is treated.

The serpent clinic was dedicated to the memory of Christopher Monk. John Stevens was acknowledged for first suggesting the session; those participating included Craig Kridel, lecturer, serpent; Ron Davis and James Woodrum, euphonium; Nan McSwain, piano; Beaumont (Kentucky) Presbyterian Church Choir, J. Kelly Diamond, director.

### Panorama of Recordings

Recently released recordings provide listeners with examples of the four musical traditions of the serpent—sacred, military, orchestral, and folk. Releases by the London Serpent Trio serve as classic mainstays for any serpent collection (*Sweet and Low*, Titanic Ti-100; *Fill Your Glasses*, Saydisc SDL 361). Now, Bernard Fourtet receives congratulations for his participation in the Ensemble Vocal Sagittarius recording (Erato/Musifrance 2292-45607-2) of *Missa Pro Defunctis* by DeCaurroy (1549-1609). Bernard previously has used the serpent with les Saqueboutier's recording of *Villancicos* (Scalen'disc/Ariane 152); however, the DeCaurroy so beautifully displays the original intent of the serpent—to give,

as its creator Canon Guillaume claimed, "a fresh zest to Gregorian Plainsong." While extant recordings of the serpent in the military band are no longer in print (although we wish to be corrected if such recordings are still available), Octophoros portrays the serpent within the Harmonie tradition. A wind ensemble of 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 horns, 2 bassoons augmented with a deep bass instrument, either a contrabassoon or serpent, became so popular in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that it attracted a special name—the Harmonie. While Mozart and Beethoven wrote for this musical "fashion," they also prepared arrangements. For example, in 1816 Beethoven personally issued his 7th and 8th Symphonies for 9 part Harmonie (recorded by Octophoros, Accent Acc 48434D). Also, many operas were arranged—uncut!—for Harmonie. The Harmonie octet, which grew out of a military band tradition, was to determine the configuration of the wind unit for the symphony orchestra. Octophoros' recording of *Wellington's Victory March* by Beethoven (Accent Acc 8860 D, Musical Heritage MHS 512700Y, *Harmonie und Janitscharenmusik*, Andrew van der Beek, serpentist) is suggestive of the Harmonie AND Janissary (Turkish) military band tradition. One will delight in the authentic use of Janissary percussion (sidedrums, cymbals, triangles, kettledrums, and cannons).

The serpent's orchestral role has been demonstrated recently in wonderful ways. Handel's *Royal Fireworks Music* performed with serpent has been available for quite some time (Vanguard VSD 71176; English Chamber Orchestra, Somary; ASD 3395, London Symphony Orchestra, Mackerras), and the Wallace Collection has prepared a beautiful recording of Berlioz's *Grande symphonie funebre et triomphale* (Nimbus NI 5175; Stephen Wick, serpentist). Now, the Hanover Band has just released Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea & Prosperous Voyage* (Nimbus 5318; Mendelssohn, *Symphony No. 3*, Scottish; Alan Lumsden, serpentist). Lastly, the folk tradition of the serpent has always been identified with Thomas Hardy and English music of the West Gallery. From the 18th to mid-19th century a band of string and wind players provided the accompaniment for singing in the English rural churches. The band sat in the west gallery of the church behind the congregation. These musicians were local townspeople and would be found playing for dances and weddings in the area. The Mellstock Band's *Under the Greenwood Tree* (Saydisc SDL 360; David Townsend, serpentist) presents the serpent as an integral part of the church band. The vitality of this music is intoxicating and may interest many in exploring this unjustly forgotten musical repertoire.



We envision an ever-expanding discography in upcoming years—there are many other orchestral works awaiting authentic-instrument recordings. The London Serpent Trio continues to flourish, and other ensembles employing the serpent are alive and active. Jay Krush continues to incorporate the serpent into the recordings of the Chestnut Brass Company. Indeed, avant-garde jazz serpentist Michel Godard is establishing a new tradition of jazz serpent with a soon-to-be-released second recording along with his first, *Le Chant du Serpent* (Label la Lichere LLL 37). Our only regret is that Simon Proctor's *Concerto for Serpent*, dedicated to and first performed by Alan Lumsden in 1989, has yet to receive a recording date. We hope that happens soon.

### United Serpents as an Organized Obsession

United Serpents—the only organization devoted solely to the serpent—has delighted in adopting a rather atypical administrative demeanor. Instead of attempting to build membership in order to obtain grants in order then to stage musical events (as is the procedure for most music organizations), United Serpents decided to skip the first two steps and just proceed to stage its events. In fact, until 1992 one could not officially join US; instead, members learned of their “induction” through the reception of the *Newsletter for US*. [Membership is now accepted by US; P.O. Box 954; Mundelein, IL 60060 USA; \$10.00.] Within this “administrative framework” US proceeded to organize (and/or assist in the organization of) four international serpent events, commission five compositions (including an official P.D.Q. Bach work as well as two full concerti), appear on NPR's Morning Edition (twice), Performance Today, ABC national radio and the BBC, receive coverage in *USA Today* and *The London Times*, and perform on one occasion for an audience of 60,000 people and, on another occasion, as a band of 57 serpentists. Not bad for an organization with no objectives!

United Serpents has been equally proud to be listed in Gale Research's *Encyclopedia of Associations*, THE premier directory of more than 20,000 associations in the United States. US was bemused, however, to find themselves appearing in *Organized Obsessions: 1,001 Offbeat Associations, Fan Clubs, and Microsocieties You Can Join* (D.M. Burek, M. Connors, editors; Detroit: Visible Ink, 1992). As the editors state in the preface: “From the surreal to the serious to the strange, *Organized Obsessions* covers the downsizing of American culture by taking a look at 1,001 associations representing millions of individuals... *Organized Obsessions* is a book for those who just like to browse and contemplate the unusual, the unlikely, and the occasionally underground micro-slices of everyday life.” As proud as US was to be included in the *Encyclopedia of Associations*, congratulations may not be in order for acceptance into *Organized Obsessions* along with such groups as the American Association of Aardvark Aficionados, Annette Funicello Fan Club, Sugar Packet Collectors Club, International Dull Folks Unlimited, American Council of Spotted Asses, and the American Collectors of Infant Feeders, to name just a few. If TUBA members wish to obtain information about United Serpents, please identify this column as your source of introduction. In sense that US will begin to monitor new member applications!

*The serpent community has suffered a great loss with the death of Christopher Monk. We conclude this column with an essay-eulogy by Clifford Bevan, prepared for the TUBA Journal and the Historic Brass Journal (Volume 3; 1992).*

### Christopher Monk: 1921-1991 The Purest Serpentist by Clifford Bevan

One morning some years ago my mother-in-law, a devout lady, telephoned. The previous evening she had watched Christopher Monk being interviewed on television and now wanted to confirm her suspicions that he really was a monk.

This misconception was shared by many. Nature had provided him with a perfect tonsure surrounded by fluffy white hair below which his keen, sparkling eyes added to the impression of a dedicated but somewhat mischievous elderly cleric. In fact he was an untimely 69 when he (as he would have said) passed on during 17 July, 1991.

His charm was that of the English gentleman (although in fact the family had Irish origins). While he was fond of describing the serpent as an endangered species, he would no more have considered himself representative of a similar group than he would have been in any way pretentious. For one of the English gentleman's distinguishing marks is a complete lack of self-consciousness. The suppers provided by his devoted wife Marty after Serpent Trio rehearsals at their home, Stock Farm House, were eaten round the antique kitchen table. The cutlery was the family silver (the soup spoons specially made to the design of an ancestor with, it appeared, a curiously distorted jaw), the prominent centrepiece inevitably an enormous plastic container of margarine, the Co-op label exposing its humble origins, and the tabletop a glued-on laminated plastic sheet.

Like many of his generation he did not approve of the dilution of national characteristics through absorption into the European Community. He was particularly outraged by Brussels bureaucrats' attempts to change the pint of beer into a fraction of a litre. One felt that the inclusion of an impressively ornamented version of Thomas Arne's *Rule, Britannia!* in the London Serpent Trio's repertoire was a positive gesture. Regardless of the other members' reluctance, he would take great delight in programming it at international gatherings of the great and powerful. He was particularly pleased by the spontaneous response of a hearty Cockney husband and father who sat immediately in front of the Trio during a lunchtime concert in London's Royal Festival Hall. “Mikes yer feel prard, dunnit!” [Makes you feel proud, doesn't it] this fellow patriot bellowed to the assembled after the last trill and appoggiatura had died away.

Christopher's maintenance of tradition was constantly demonstrated in his consideration for others: the true definition, after all, of good manners. This led him to take on vast amounts of work and responsibility rather than inconvenience those about him. No wonder that when others would ask, “What's the time?” his form of enquiry was, “How's the enemy?” It was also the reason for his inevitable opening to a telephone call: “I'm not interrupting a meal, or anything important like that, am I?” In fact, he always managed to ring when the family was in the middle of dinner or one was teaching or mending a blown fuse,



but it would have been churlish in the extreme to have told him so after so sincerely concerned an enquiry.

Here were echoes of the Raj, and Britain's glorious days. Christopher William Monk was born in Delhi on 28 December, 1921 into a family where one brother was to enter medicine and another the Church. He was educated at Twyford, Repton and University College School (with more than a year's gap in his education, spent in hospitals suffering from osteomyelitis) and then Lincoln College, Oxford where he read History from 1940-44. There followed service in the Merchant Navy. He was proud of the testimonial from one of his commanders which hung framed in the loo at his home: "Cheerful company and a good plain cook in all weathers."

He then taught in prep schools in Yorkshire and Surrey. Here the gentle breezes that wafted over Hindhead brought news from Haslemere, the base of the Dolmetsch family for their pioneering work in the Early Music Revival.

While at Oxford Monk had studied trumpet with George Eskdale, principal with the London Symphony Orchestra and later to record the Second Brandenburg, previously considered unplayable. Now historian and musician converged and melded. Christopher Monk held firmly that the only way to gain a true impression of a previous era was to become involved in the same activities as those living at that particular time.

In 1955 he completed his first cornettino and in April 1958, with his colleague Brian Baker, gave the first UK broadcast on the cornett. The foundations of his international reputation were laid six years later with the chapter on "The Older Brass Instruments" in *Musical Instruments Through the Ages*, the seminal Penguin Book edited by Anthony Baines.

Future activities were being increasingly defined by other aspects of his personality. In later years he was to be amongst the first of his circle into the personal computer, the cordless telephone and the microwave oven. Playing with sounds and shapes led to his familiar method of writing his own name: X24. Playing with new interests, new concepts and new techniques was a mirror image of the historian and led to possibly the most important single step in his missionary work on behalf of Early Music when in 1968 he and Len Ward devised a method of making cornetts from resin. These inexpensive instruments were painlessly purchased by thousands of enthusiasts the world over.

His first serpent was painstakingly carved by hand from the plank over a period of nine months. The experience led him to conclude that while traditional materials and design were essential, the only way to make the instruments financially viable was to invest in the most modern technology.

The team that installed the large chunk of advanced American machinery in the converted cowshed next to Monk's home high on the downs near the border of Surrey and Sussex were more accustomed to working in aircraft factories. But their skepticism was ill-founded: he had made his calculations with care, and his novel methods for building traditional serpents (using machinery designed for precision metal-working) were totally successful.

During the 1980's he developed his sackbuts and natural trumpets (with Ted Kirby), then the flat trumpet (with Andrew Pinnock). The instruments were built by Frank Tones. But it was the serpent with which he was inevitably to be most closely identified.

Christopher Monk was the first to stop making derisive remarks and instead coolly assess the serpent's unique qualities: an instrument with a continuous working life of 300 years, which was theoretically unplayable; an instrument with virtually no repertoire, merely a handful of extant score designations; an instrument which had stimulated little but unfavorable criticism from Burney onwards. Yet the iconography was extensive; a reasonable number of examples were in existence (though few were still playable), and there was sufficient pedagogical material (fingering charts, tutors) for a serious approach to be made to the task of formulating a practical technique.

With Andrew van der Beek and Alan Lumsden he formed the London Serpent Trio, which first appeared in public in 1976. It was the first such trio in the history of music, and Monk often remarked that he expected it to be the last! The enterprise satisfied his whimsical sense of humor; the awesome problems of playing a simple triad in tune; the creation of a new and largely unbelievable repertoire; dressing up in period costume (which period?); gently taunting the more straight-faced of the Early Music Movement. (If Wagner had composed for serpent was it really an "early" instrument? If no trios for serpents were written before the 1970's could the ensemble give "authentic" performances?)

This sinuous selection of Gilbertian paradoxes appealed immensely to Christopher Monk. And inevitably it led, via concerts, recordings and tours (three of them to the United States) through the memorable First International Serpent Festival in South Carolina to his glorious swan song: the 1990 Serpent Celebration in London.

His energy, his commitment, his enthusiasm, his zest for life all interacted to create this monster event with its platform saturated in serpentists, his new unique double-size church serpent and the 1812 finale with balloon-bursting capacity audience.

Christopher Monk's relationship with the serpent was truly remarkable: while virtually all other serpentists, amateur or professional, primarily play tuba or trombone, or the earlier but practicable sackbut, uniquely Christopher Monk had become totally a serpent-player and serpent-maker. He lived by the serpent, worked and played by the serpent. This warm, witty and whimsical man became one with the fabulous beast: the purest serpentist.

Those of us charged with carrying out his express wish of keeping the London Serpent Trio in existence have a daunting task: the maintenance of a vital living organism as the only apt memorial.

And do you believe they are still only plucking harps up there?