

John Hagstrom in conversation with Philip Biggs

I make no secret of the fact that Chicago is one of my favourite cities in the world, so a spring was certainly in my step as I made my way the few hundred yards along Michigan Avenue to Orchestra Hall after dropping the bags off in my hotel. It's John Hagstrom that I am about to interview and quite frankly, I can't wait.

John Hagstrom, 17 years a member of the world famed brass section of the Chicago Symphony and a man who has such a width and range of knowledge of all things brass. I first met John at the MidWest Clinic back in December and found what he had to say so compelling that I vowed that at the first possible opportunity I would attempt to meet up with him to find out more and share it with all *Brass Herald* readers.

John has just completed a gruelling rehearsal in Orchestra Hall with Ricardo Muti and I wonder if following a hard afternoon's work he may rather just wish to wind down and relax. Not a bit of it - John was the consummate host; he couldn't wait to start the interview and was most gracious.

He found a vacant practise room in the bowels of Orchestra Hall and the next three hours literally flew by.

As I walk with John through the corridors, I see so many of the brass section staying on after the rehearsal. Hey! There's Gene Pokorny - he's setting up for more personal practise. Always, so friendly and welcoming, he allows me to interrupt the practise for a few moments and speaks of a visit to the UK in the fall where he will be seeing our mutual friend and *Brass Herald* columnist, Jonathan Rees. We turn a corner and there is Chris Martin, who I will be spending time with the following week at the International Trumpet Guild Conference in Grand Rapids. There are wonderful brass sounds filtering out from many of the rooms.

It's for good reason that the Chicago Symphony brass section is world renowned. No rushing off after the rehearsal has finished - a commitment and singular purpose you can feel, almost touch - I think you get the idea! Right, down to the interview with the man I have been so looking forward to featuring in *The Brass Herald* - John Hagstrom. We cover so many aspects of brass performance and music and much of

John's illustrious career, as a professional musician, instrument designer, teacher, historian - in fact a complete resource centre.



John Hagstrom.

John joined the Chicago Symphony as 4th Trumpet in 1996 and in 1997 won the 2nd Trumpet position. This was following a year as Principal Trumpet of the Wichita Symphony Orchestra in Kansas. Prior to Wichita, John was the Principal Trumpet of United States Marine Band in Washington, D.C. This is some career pathway! John was Principal of "The President's Own" from 1993-1995, having joined the Marine Band in 1989. John tells me when he started there were still musicians in the band from the Vietnam War days.

Turning to life in the fast lane of world famed orchestras, I put it to John that if you wish to live a long and successful life and have the God given ability, the best way to achieve this is to join one of the most revered brass sections in the world.



John Hagstrom's first solo performance in 1975.

"The predecessors in each of the positions of the CSO brass section have left big shoes for us to fill!" John explains. "I can't speak for any of the other players except to tell you that we all have a great respect for the tradition of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra brass sound, and we do our best to pass on the energy and inspiration we

have inherited. I have learned lots from so many of the previous trumpet players in the CSO. Each of them has added something to the sound of the orchestra and I have worked to incorporate as many of those qualities into my playing as possible. It is definitely a full time job! I still feel so lucky to have had the chance to be part of this team of players. No matter how much work one does to learn and improve, there is always so much more to be accomplished. As Bud Herseth used to say when we would talk about this - 'It never ends!'"

It's a well documented fact that John has worked very closely with the Yamaha Corporation to create new trumpet designs. "Working with Yamaha is such a pleasure," John tells me. "Yamaha has a great capacity for creativity. I don't pretend - nobody at Yamaha pretends - that designing a trumpet is an easy process. I started working with Yamaha in 2000 and have helped to create several professional trumpet designs that include their top selling Chicago Artist Model series Bb and C trumpets. I have also worked with them to create a C cornet designed for orchestral playing, as well as an Eb/D trumpet and Bb/A piccolo trumpet." As reported in the May issue of *The Brass Herald*, Yamaha has very recently brought a brand new Chicago Artist Model C Trumpet to the market. John was once again central to this new model and describes it as: incorporating the best of what we have learned from each of the previous trumpet design projects, and lots of new ideas that have been made possible with Yamaha's recent advances in prototyping and manufacturing technology. It is by far the best yet."

Then John says: "Philip, do you remember me telling you last December about Room 428 in the Fine Arts Building and would you like to see it?" My answer is an emphatic Yes and Yes. On our way down Michigan Avenue, John tells me Arnold Jacobs acquired the room - which is a teaching studio - back in 1973 and literally thousands of brass students have passed through this studio in their pursuit of excellence. "When the studio became available, the owner of the Fine Arts Building was considering renting it to an architectural firm that was trying to expand into a few more rooms on the fourth floor. There is no other space outside of Orchestra Hall that has more of a connection with the Chicago Symphony brass tradition," continues John, "so eleven years ago, I took the obvious step and rented it myself." We really are on an adventure here; entering

the main reception we pass through the lobby and John rings the elevator bell. What happens next is like a scene from a 1930s American movie. We wait, the lift arrives and involuntarily I move forward towards the door. John politely stops me, and firstly the inside door and then the outside door are slowly opened, revealing the elevator attendant who is seated on a stool in the lift! John tells me that this is the last manually operated elevator in Chicago. I look around at the internal decor and marvel at what I see - and we haven't reached Room 428 yet.

The ornate wooden splendour coupled with the marvellous masonry all over this 1901 building is a sight well worth beholding. We arrive at Room 428; on the door is large notice, a very moving and powerful statement about Arnold Jacobs from the address that Gene Pokorny gave at the dedication of the Arnold Jacobs Principal Tuba Chair in October of 2001.

Inside the room it's like a museum dedicated to the man who joined the Chicago Symphony in 1944 and one of the creators of the Chicago Symphony Brass sound. The chair that Mr Jacobs' used in this room for so many years is also on display. The walls are adorned with pictures and quotations about Mr. Jacobs from those who worked with him, including former CSO music director Sir Georg Solti. How right it is that this great man's legacy is preserved - and so refreshing bearing in mind that in today's world so much of the past which is good seems to be discarded as the earliest opportunity. So, now to the serious business of the interview.

PB John, you were born and raised in the Chicago area. Were you born into a musical family?

JH My parents were not professional musicians, but they were very supportive of my aspirations to become a musician. In some ways this was an advantage for me in that playing music was something that I had decided to do, and not something that I was supposed to do to live up to a parent's expectation or to follow in their footsteps.

PB How did the trumpet find you?

JH I grew up in the western Chicago suburb of Elmhurst and the public school music programme was very



John Hagstrom as part of a cornet trio soloing with "The President's Own" United States Marine Band as part of their 1992 National Concert Tour. The other cornetists are Richard Lehman (left), Frederick Marcellus (right), and conductor Timothy Foley.

strong - and it still is! In the fourth grade each student had the opportunity to start to play an instrument. I chose the cornet, which was the closest thing they had to the trumpet. The cornet is a little easier to hold for a fourth grader and for this reason they didn't start students on the trumpet until a few years later. The reason I was interested was that I had seen Doc Severinsen play incredible trumpet solos on television and I wanted to make that kind of sound myself. I'm sure that thousands of other kids started for the same reason, but we all learned on that first day of trying to play that sounding like Doc Severinsen was going to be much harder than we thought!

PB What was your early music education and who were your teachers?

JH My first teacher was Duane Tutaj, who taught lessons to each of the students



John Hagstrom as the featured soloist with "The President's Own" United States Marine Band on March 15, 2010.

beginning instruments in the fourth grade in south Elmhurst. After about four weeks he called my mother and told her I wasn't doing very well and perhaps I should consider quitting! There were 21 other fourth graders also starting the cornet that year and perhaps he was just trying to get the band down to a more manageable size. Even so, I was devastated and wanted to do whatever it would take to improve. He recommended a record (which is a flat black disc made of vinyl) containing simple trumpet melodies that also included the sheet music with which to play along. I worked with that record almost every day and after a few months he called my mother again

to say that I was doing much better! I think that early experience was crucial for me to stay motivated later. Many people think that motivation comes from always telling someone how well they are doing no matter what the truth really is. I had to learn early on that I could actually be doing poorly even though I was making a strong effort. Trying hard on its own does not guarantee success!

I was very lucky that many of the people teaching private trumpet lessons locally in Elmhurst were also accomplished trumpet players. In high school I was fortunate to study with Rick Henly and Steve Hendrickson, both of whom had been members of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago and students of Adolph Herseth. They both were also very honest teachers and challenged me to do more than just get the right notes when I played. I was studying with Steve Hendrickson when he won his job in the National Symphony Orchestra in 1981, and he taught me also how much work goes into winning a professional audition.

PB You studied at Eastman School of Music and then Wichita State University.

JH I was fortunate in my senior year of high school to study with William Scarlett, the CSO's assistant principal trumpeter from 1966 until 1994. He was very helpful as a teacher and he also recommended that I study at the Eastman School of Music. I studied with Charlie Geyer and Barbara Butler at Eastman, and they were both very helpful to me, as they have also been for many other trumpeters since! I spent five years at Eastman and played in a brass quintet the entire time. It was that experience that prepared me most effectively for professional playing and especially for playing

second trumpet. I also attended Wichita State University after Eastman, which has a graduate teaching assistantship that includes playing second trumpet in the faculty brass quintet and in the Wichita Symphony Orchestra. Many professional trumpet players have gotten their start from that position, including David Hickman, Stephen Jones, Jeff Curnow, Jerry Keehner and Fred Marcellus! It is rare for a student to be given the responsibility to uphold professional standards on a constant basis and especially the experience of playing in the Wichita Brass Quintet helped me to prepare effectively for playing professionally.

Listening and matching as you perform is not easy, and without playing in small chamber groups it is difficult to learn the skills needed to play and communicate with others. Most of what a player does in an orchestra consists of playing very simple (but not necessarily easy) music perfectly in context with others on little to no rehearsal. The sensitivity and agility to do that does not come from practicing excerpts and many players who are successful at auditions find out that *keeping* a job is a matter of developing complementary ensemble skills in addition to the individual virtuosity that helped them to win the audition. My adaptability as a player helped me to keep my job in the CSO and part of why Adolph Herseth was comfortable enough with me to allow me to play second to him during his final seasons as principal trumpet.

PB Am I correct that Phil Snedecor was a friend and colleague when you were at college?

JH Yes. Phil was one of the role models other Eastman students tried to emulate, and still one of the most talented and versatile professional players today. As a student he was playing lead trumpet, playing in Eastman's fellowship brass quintet, playing prominent parts in the Eastman Wind Ensemble and Philharmonia, and also writing and arranging music! If you go back and listen to the 'Carnival' cornet solo CD Wynton Marsalis recorded with the Eastman Wind Ensemble in 1984, the most stylish trumpet playing in the accompaniments is coming from Phil Snedecor! He was in the same class with two other players who have also gone on to great accomplishments - Jeff Beal and Doug Prosser. Doug is currently the principal trumpet of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, and Jeff is an award winning composer of film and television music. As inspiring as it is to study with any teacher, it is perhaps even more motivating for students to learn from the other students, and this was certainly the case for me studying at Eastman in

those years. I always felt like a "small potato" compared to those guys and the memory of that time keeps me working hard still today. People often tell me that they are impressed by my work ethic, but I think my work habits are still less impressive than what I witnessed as I watched these other Eastman students!

PB Following graduation, you accepted the invitation to join the "The President's Own" United States Marine Band in Washington D.C. and spent six years with this world famous band, a few years of which were as Principal Trumpet. This must have been such an exciting period in your life.

JH It was a fantastic opportunity to start to apply all that I had learned at Eastman and at Wichita State. I had also studied in my last year at Eastman additionally with Vincent DiMartino. Lots of the ideas he taught me helped to make sense out of the other teaching I had received. I had learned lots about musicianship at Eastman, but I still had not really figured out as much as I needed to about the basic fundamentals of how trumpet playing works. Vince is one of the best teachers for helping students understand trumpet fundamentals and part of what he also helped me to understand was that I had lots of work ahead of me to develop the weaker areas in my tone production! In August of 1991, the Marine Band hired Arnold Jacobs to come to Washington



John Hagstrom and Chicago Symphony Orchestra principal trumpeter Christopher Martin.

Photo: Todd Rosenberg



John Hagstrom with Adolph Herseth in 2003.

Photo: Todd Gustafson

for a week and teach classes and individual lessons for all of the Marine Band members. I attended every minute of every lesson and class he taught that week, and all of those sessions were also the basis for Brian Frederickson's book about Arnold Jacobs titled *Song and Wind*. The things I learned from Arnold Jacobs that week further transformed my playing and I am eternally grateful for how he helped me to see how I needed to adjust my playing to get a more orchestrally vocal sound.

The time in the Marine Band was perfectly suited for practicing and then applying all that I was able to achieve. I was also fortunate to have had many opportunities to solo with the band in Washington and also on their national concert tours. Those experiences were extremely helpful for me to learn how to practice effectively on tour and play repertoire over and over in a way that can still be inspiring to listeners, even though I might be personally bored with the music. Playing patriotic music for veterans (often in attendance at Marine Band concerts) will teach you the lesson that performing music is for the audience and that playing is not always for your own amusement! Working in the White House playing for the President of the United States is also a great honour. The Marine Band is often present for the President's speeches around Washington, playing for the crowds as the secret service is securing the room for the President's arrival and departure. The band has the opportunity to hear the entirety of the President's speeches and not just the sound bites played back on the news. I learned lots from listening to (Sr.) President Bush and President Clinton speak.

PB Back in December you kindly showed me the "Trumpets that Work" 2013 Calendar. If I may say, I find this and the concept quite ingenious. A great story each month and we all have 30 days to study it.

JH I have a pretty big collection of vintage trumpets, most of them coming

from the period of 1900 to about 1940. My collection was initially inspired by Adolph Herseth telling me stories about the trumpets he started on. He began playing on a Conn 22B Bb trumpet built in the 1920s. I had no idea what that was, so I got one and had it totally restored. I couldn't play it very well and I brought it to work to show to Bud. He picked it up and immediately could play it beautifully. That experience taught me that there just might be some important lessons to be learned from older instruments that I hadn't considered. Little by little I have built my collection and I thought that a calendar might be a nice way to share interesting background information in a format that could be just enough to interest others, but not too much - because there just isn't room!

PB Thanks so much for the sneak preview of the 2014 calendar. It looks fantastic John. As well as new topics each month, are there any new innovations we can look forward to seeing?

JH In the 2014 "Trumpets That Work" calendar, I have expanded the depth of the stories about players and makers associated with each instrument. The photography of each instrument is improved and many pages have additional images featuring the bell engravings, which on many of the featured instruments is quite detailed and beautiful. Many of the trumpets have connections with Chicago and the Chicago Symphony. Most people don't realize that Chicago has been where many of the most influential trumpet and cornet designs have come from. Steve Winans did a great job as the photographer for this project, and Nick DeCarlis has also done fantastic graphic



John Hagstrom with Bob Malone in Beijing, China in 2011.



John Hagstrom in Room 428.

design work to incorporate all of the information and pictures into each page. If you haven't seen the book Nick has written about pocket cornets, you should get one. It's really great!

PB Turning to your innovative work with the Yamaha Corporation, how and when did this commence?

JH I started working with Yamaha when they hired Bob Malone to help them in the year 2000. I met Bob for the first time in the summer of 1986 when I played in the College Band in Disneyland out in California. He worked on my C trumpet, and it really helped me to improve. I had really struggled with my C trumpet before that and I kept in touch with him from then on to keep learning about things that could help improve my trumpets. Bob did some incredibly extensive research in the 1980s that formed the basis of his leadpipe designs and trumpet conversions. Some of the most incredible trumpet playing that I was inspired by in the 1980s came from Tom Stevens, Håkan Hardenberger and Ole Edvard Antonsen. All of these players were playing on instruments with Malone leadpipes and/or on trumpets that had been completely overhauled by Bob. As innovative as Bob was in those years, he was still struggling with the obstacle of the inconsistency of parts incorporated into many trumpets. When he started working for Yamaha, he finally had a way for his innovative design features to be duplicated consistently. Yamaha was also located at that time in Grand Rapids, Michigan and it was relatively easy for us to travel back

and forth to prototype and test trumpets we had built as experiments. We worked hard for several years and it wasn't until 2003 that we finally arrived on a design that would be the Chicago Artist Model C trumpet. We finished the Chicago Artist Model Bb in 2005, the Orchestral C cornet in 2006, Custom Eb/D trumpet in 2007 and the Custom Bb/A piccolo trumpet in 2008. All of those projects helped us to learn more about trumpet design and several more years of experiments have gone into the "next generation" of the Chicago Artist Model C trumpet, which is becoming available now.

It is important for me to emphasize that any successful trumpet design is a sum total of many people's efforts coming together and the part I have played with Yamaha is to test the experimental prototypes in the orchestra and also alone on the stage of Orchestra Hall. I have also helped them to incorporate details present in some vintage trumpets that can be helpful within their current designs. I have worked very hard always to keep the process impartial and free of prejudice for or against whatever we might be testing. I have never been compensated for the work I have done and that is at my insistence so that I will never feel the necessity to play a Yamaha trumpet unless it is the preferable choice for the tasks of my job in the CSO or as a soloist.

PB It was such a great experience to be taken to Room 428 in the Fine Arts Building, the former Arnold Jacobs' teaching studio. Thank you so much for doing this. Why was it important to you to keep the room on? It's almost like a shrine to the great man.

JH Well, my intention is to pay homage to the kindness and commitment of Arnold Jacobs. Some people almost worship him as though he was divine and although those people may have good intentions, I think there is an amount of adulation that can cause more problems than it solves. Arnold Jacobs was a thoughtful and curious person who applied his talents as best as he knew how - to help others. Where information was lacking, he did his own research and discovered things that helped players to make sense of their experiences playing their instruments and making music. In the same way, and as good students of his, we must also make sense of new information and stand on the foundations he and other dedicated players and teachers have laid for all of us.

In the October issue of The Brass Herald John Hagstrom will be enlightening us on his illustrious professional orchestral career, more on the Yamaha Chicago trumpets, his teaching career, his thoughts on teaching and much more....