

# John Hagstrom in conversation with Philip Biggs

## Part 3

**PB** John, welcome back once again to *The Brass Herald*. The previous interviews have created much interest on both sides of the ocean.

**JH** Thanks, Philip, for one more opportunity to answer any further questions or to clarify anything I said previously. I'm honoured that you wish to continue our conversation!

**PB** I would like to ask you more about what it is like to play in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Was winning your job in the CSO a dream come true?

**JH** This may sound strange, but throughout most of my schooling and early professional life I never dreamed of being an orchestral player, much less a member of the CSO. As a young student, I studied with several members of the CSO trumpet section and a few players who had played extra with the CSO trumpet section. They were very candid with me about the enjoyment they experienced playing with the CSO, but also about the rigours of having a job like this. Their influence helped me to be more connected to what kind of commitment one undertakes to uphold the standards expected of players in a great orchestra. Accordingly, my professional hopes have always been tempered by a significant amount of true understanding.

When I was in high school, my band director encouraged me to pursue a career as a professional musician, but he was also very candid with me about the chances for any aspiring instrumentalist to find a full-time playing position. He would regularly challenge me to think about my motivations for wanting to become a professional player. I remember on one particular occasion he actually said: "You know, John, there's a good chance you will never be in the Chicago Symphony, and if you aren't, what do you think you will end up doing?" His candour did me a big favour, because it caused me to set my sights on the more realistic goal of training to become the best musician I could be and accepting whatever career possibility I could accomplish, hopefully as a musician.

**PB** When you won your first job as a member of the Marine Band, did you feel then that you had achieved the goals you had set for yourself up to that point?

**JH** Absolutely! I was very fortunate to win an audition for "The President's Own" United States Marine Band while still in graduate school at Wichita State University. I was practicing diligently, but had not intended to even begin taking auditions until after I had finished school. The only reason I took that particular

audition was because the previous graduate teaching assistant at WSU was taking it and he needed someone to help him drive from Wichita to Washington, DC for the audition. I remember him saying to me: "Come on - it'll be good for you"! We prepared together for the audition for several weeks ahead of time and he was very encouraging, but I also remember that the car ride back to Wichita was very quiet. He went on to have an extremely successful career playing in the United States Navy Band.



**John Hagstrom has been a member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1996. Currently in his seventeenth season as the orchestra's second trumpeter, he has held this position longer than any other player in the CSO's history.**

**PB** Did you continue to study privately with professional players while in the Marine Band?

**JH** Yes. One of the most helpful teachers I had while in Washington was Ed Hoffman, who was at that time the assistant principal trumpet of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. He still is a tremendously positive influence on students, and he had encouraged me to prepare and audition for the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra in 1992. I didn't play very well, however, and I felt very discouraged after having worked harder than ever to prepare. He gave me some great advice that I still think about when I am preparing for any big performance. He told me that the amount of work that I had done was indeed very significant, and that someday I would look back and truly understand how much of my later accomplishments it had made possible. He was right. I remain grateful to him for helping me to see my ongoing effort as

a *work in progress* instead of setting myself up to only feel judged and dismissed.

While the Marine Band was on tour in San Francisco in 1994, I scheduled a lesson with Glenn Fischthal (SFSO principal trumpet 1980-2004). I had never met him before that day. At the end of the lesson he said: "You sound good - why aren't you playing in an orchestra somewhere?" That moment was actually the first time that I started to feel that I might have a real chance to win a job in an orchestra, but had never imagined that I would end up in the CSO. I think in many ways I have been well served by focusing mainly on what my next steps are for improvement instead of striving to turn a specific dream into reality. My "dreams" currently are still more about musical creativity and less about attaining any particular professional position.

**PB** What specific advice would you offer a player hoping to win a job in an orchestra?

**JH** It takes a tremendous amount of preparation and experience to win a symphony orchestra job, but there is also a bit of luck involved to have offered the qualities that a particular committee and/or music director is looking for. Any advice given to another player is just a part of what is required to win an audition, but my experience listening to CSO auditions and having auditioned successfully myself may provide a few tips:

*Don't cram for the test.* Players can inadvertently develop from their schooling a habit of working on projects at the last minute. Playing a successful audition under pressure is only possible if habits are well developed and that takes time. If you are unable to play the excerpts consistently well at least one month prior to the audition, it is unlikely that you can play up to the level expected to be the preferred candidate. Spend that last month playing for different people who play different instruments than the one you play. I learned as much or more before my CSO audition by playing for an oboist and a violinist than I did by playing for other trumpet players.

*"Play like a singer."* That was one of Adolph Herseth's favourite sayings, and before my CSO audition in 1996 I decided to experiment with *singing like a player*, recording myself singing the excerpts on the audition list. I am still a horrible vocalist, but my intention was to sing perfect rhythms and a convincing musical style with whatever voice I had. I actually did most of that work as I was driving long



A member of "The President's Own" United States Marine Band from 1989 until 1995, John Hagstrom performed as a soloist with the band on four national concert tours.

Photo: Andrew Linden

distances in the car. Listening to myself played back was excruciating at first, but the resolve and concentration I learned was a big part of how I remained poised in the finals.

*Listen like the audition committee.* The vast majority of audition committee members are not looking at the music as they listen to your performance. In the same way that we all can listen to a person speaking our native language and in just a few seconds discern their dialect, level of education, confidence and so on, a committee of professional players immediately gets a sense of habits in a candidate's tone production, level of experience and potential to be a competent colleague. Record yourself playing several excerpts consecutively and listen back without looking at the music. The first 20-30 times I did this I wanted to jump out of a window, but eventually started to find solutions for what my audition ears were hearing. One other important thing to remember is that a committee sitting in their own concert hall listening to you play on stage will never hear your sound from their seat at a level louder than about 75 decibels in the loudest passages. Make sure that when you listen back to yourself that you also have adjusted the playback volume to never exceed that. Especially for trumpet players, this will reveal note shape and phrasing flaws that you may have thought were just fine when listening back at higher volumes.

*Just another day.* Play one or more virtual auditions every day for several weeks prior to the real audition. For me, this

included actually putting my trumpets in my case, sitting in the hallway for five minutes and then entering the room, unpacking and playing. It is during all of those delays when players often tie themselves in knots, so I decided to take the time to include that in my preparation. When I auditioned for real, it felt familiar and even calming.

These are just a few suggestions. There are so many areas to be developed in order to become a competent orchestral player. Many students imagine that playing in a great orchestra will feel like the sensation they get when they are *listening* to recordings or live performances of a great orchestra. To be sure, there are glorious moments of great music making as a CSO musician, but the *disciplined preparation* needed to sustain physical and mental stamina in performances is much greater than most students anticipate.

**PB** I would like to recap and expand on the work you do with the CSO to support and promote music education in the schools. Please tell me why you find it so important.

**JH** There are many reasons for this work, including the idea that people who play instruments are often lifelong fans and supporters of musicians and the live concert experience. The programme I helped the CSO develop in 2007 is called *Dream Out Loud* and it currently features five CSO musicians. Using posters and video profiles, the stories of their beginnings in music encourage young students, describing their early enjoyment and struggles starting out. *Dream Out Loud* has already been very helpful to many thousands of teachers and students. Any teacher in the United States can have posters sent to their school for free just by filling out information on the CSO's website at: [www.cso.org/dreamoutloud](http://www.cso.org/dreamoutloud). The posters and videos are also downloadable directly off that same link on the CSO's website for anyone anywhere with an online connection.

I hope your readers will take a moment to visit and discover how this resource might be helpful to them or their students. Students in school face lots of pressures. Musical training has become more important than ever as a way to learn important lessons about working together with others, solving difficult problems, time management, expressive beauty and countless other things.

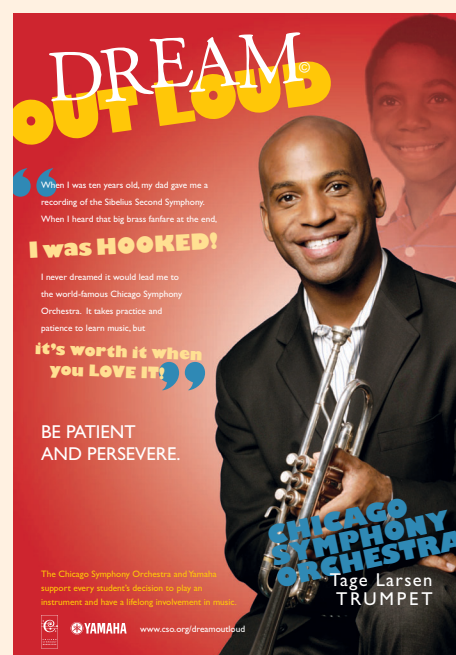
I feel very strongly that recent technological advances have in many ways made it more difficult for students to develop connections with others in real time and in a real space. Social media outlets attempt to impersonate the texture of real human presence, but ultimately they fail to connect us together as well as the experience of learning and performing

music does. As responsible adults, a musical education is therefore perhaps one of the greatest gifts we can give to young people. The CSO will be making a presentation about the *Dream Out Loud* programme at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic in Chicago on Friday, December 20th at 11am. I hope you and some of your readers can attend.

**PB** I will be there! I also want to ask you a bit more about the 2014 trumpet calendar you have created. You discussed this in the last instalment. I must tell you that I have already started enjoying mine before 2014 has even begun! What are you hoping to accomplish with all of the work you have put into its design and distribution?

**JH** As I said before, I have a large collection of vintage trumpets. Over the years of learning about how they work and the people who invented them, I have become more and more enthusiastic about playing the trumpet and learning the history of players from previous generations. I have found that other people also enjoy learning about these things when the information is presented in an interesting and visually attractive way, which is what I have aimed to accomplish with this calendar design. As a young student growing up in the Chicago area, I was so overwhelmed by going to music stores with lots of trumpets on display. In a small way I am hoping to pass on the curiosity those experiences instilled in me.

Hal Leonard is the sole world-wide distributor and it has become a very popular item for their dealers. Up until this point almost every musical instrument



John Hagstrom helped to start Dream Out Loud, a CSO program to support music education with the stories of selected CSO musicians. This poster showcases fellow trumpet colleague Tage Larsen.

Graphic: Chicago Symphony Orchestra



calendar has featured....guitars. I'm hopeful that your readers will agree with me when I say that the stories of many of the most innovative trumpet designs are so much more fun to learn about, though I know it is impossible for me to be objective about this. I can only hope the same is true for all of your *Brass Herald* readers!

**PB** *You won your position with the CSO back in 1996 with the great majority of your professional experience as a military band member. How unusual is it for a player in a military band to get a job with an orchestra?*

**JH** While it is not typical, it is not completely uncommon for a musician in a military band to eventually find a position with a major symphony orchestra. There are several other trumpet players who have also accomplished this. From the Marine Band alone I can think of a few examples, including David Flowers and Keith Jones (National Symphony Orchestra, Washington, DC), Tom Hooten (Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic) and Tage Larsen (St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra). The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's principal trumpet player from 1911 to 1933 was Edward Llewellyn. He was also the Marine Band's solo cornet player from 1905 until 1906.

While playing in a military band does not expose players to the majority of pieces in the traditional orchestral repertoire, lots of orchestral pieces have been transcribed for band. The physical requirements are extremely difficult for a trumpet player to perform long concert band and wind ensemble programmes. This is especially true for the extended national tours that the premier military bands undertake each year. While I was in the Marine Band, I went on five national concert tours, which in those days were 49 concerts in the space of only 52 days! Each day consisted of travelling on a bus to the next town, practicing and then performing a concert. Those experiences really taught me how to plan the time structure and content of my practicing in order to be able to deliver strong playing each night.

Another lesson one must learn in the military is how to obey authority without question. Musicians are not always very good at this at first, but the United States Marine Corps can be extremely persuasive to those who may wish to experiment with violating rules! While this may seem oppressive, I actually found it to be very helpful as a safety net, protecting musicians from poor behaviour they may otherwise exhibit toward one another. Accordingly, musicians in military bands can feel a great sense of camaraderie. I'm still very connected to many of the players



**John Hagstrom and Adolph Herseth in 2003, during Mr. Herseth's final season as the CSO's principal trumpet emeritus.**

Photo: Todd Gustafson

I served with during those years. My experiences performing in Washington, DC and in towns across America taught me how powerfully music can stir up feelings of unity and pride. A professional musician must learn that performances are as much or more a gift to the listener as they are the personal expression of the performer. Nothing can teach that lesson more convincingly than performing as part of a military group.

Most people are unaware that the start of the modern quality of the CSO brass section was partially influenced by the military experience of CSO players during World War II. Adolph Herseth served in the United States Navy and was the first new trumpet player to join the CSO after the war (1948). Three other veterans quickly followed - Rudy Nashan (1950), Bill Babcock (1951) and Vincent Cichowicz (1952). Their ability to work productively together is evidenced by the

tremendous quality of their section playing on the recordings from that era. Herseth, Nashan and Babcock were also classmates at the New England Conservatory in Boston immediately after the war. All of them returned to school because of the *Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944* (also known as the "G.I. Bill"), which was legislation making it possible for WWII veterans to continue their education after their service with assistance from the government. The unified trumpet sound they created has been passed on to successive generations of CSO trumpet players now for over 60 years.

I have found that there are many similarities between the musical commitment I see in my CSO colleagues and the unwavering professional discipline of my former Marine Band colleagues. Performing heavy programmes one after another is one of the most difficult aspects of being in the CSO. Without the experience of playing at a high level in the Marine Band night after night, I don't think I could have succeeded in this job for very long.

**PB** *Did it take time to integrate within the section and the orchestra or did it happen very quickly?*

**JH** For every new player coming into a big orchestra it can take a significant amount of time to learn how to fit into the dynamics of how the other musicians work and play together. The other members of the CSO are very willing to be helpful and they also know from their own experience that each new player needs some time to become familiar with their new surroundings. Every orchestra has its own method of playing together in response to different styles of conducting. That intuition is what takes the longest to develop. Performing well alone is much easier than aligning your playing to



**John and Rudy Nashan, the CSO's second trumpet player from 1950 until 1961. Originally from Chicago, Mr. Nashan was also a classmate of Adolph Herseth at the New England Conservatory of Music after their military service during World War II.**

complement the sound of an entire orchestra.

The first thing I noticed as a new CSO player is that there is not a great deal of discussion about how to play a particular phrase, where to breathe, etc. Players are expected to listen to one another and adjust their efforts to appropriately support and blend. Occasionally questions are asked of the conductor, but only when absolutely necessary. The section players in all of the sections of the CSO play with tremendous commitment and intensity. They are often so well synchronized that listeners might not realize how much of the orchestra's sound is actually coming from their supportive parts.

I began playing with the CSO in the summer of 1996 in concerts the orchestra performs at the Ravinia Festival, located in a beautiful park about 25 miles north of Chicago. Those summer concerts are a good way for a new player to start out because the programmes are played only once and not recorded for broadcast. I remember the first piece I rehearsed with the CSO was Bruckner's Ninth Symphony with Semyon Bychkov conducting. When the full brass tutti came in after the introduction, it was so intense that I literally stopped playing for a moment! It was overwhelming to be playing alongside the players that I had listened to and emulated for many years prior. The immense amount of work necessary to be a competent CSO player had begun.

**PB** *What do you recall from the first time you ever played second trumpet to Bud Herseth?*

**JH** The first time I played second trumpet to Adolph Herseth was in the last week of that 1996 Ravinia season. The programme was Robert Schumann's *Scene's from Goethe's Faust*, conducted by Christoph Eschenbach. Mr. Herseth informed me that he would be playing this on a German rotary-valved trumpet and that I should bring mine so I could do the same. Most of the trumpet parts in that piece are written in rhythmic unison in octaves and diatonic intervals. It was a great opportunity for me to learn at close range his rhythmic placements and colour blend with the orchestra.

I remember that it took me most of the first rehearsal to learn to play with him precisely. He didn't give me any instructions, but every once in a while when I would play a short passage with him perfectly matching his intonation, rhythm and tone colour, he would say softly "There's one." From that feedback I knew that he was listening to me carefully and letting me know what his standards were very economically. Ever since that day, I expect my standards for second



**John Hagstrom in a 2011 recital program at Yamaha's concert hall in Tokyo, Japan. Since 2001 he has assisted Yamaha in creating several successful trumpet designs in collaboration with Bob Malone.**

*Photo: Yamaha Corporation of Japan*

playing will be worthy of the CSO only when I can also say to myself: "There's one!"

**PB** *I know every Brass Herald reader wants to know more of what it was like to sit beside the great Adolph Herseth. Could you share with readers some things you learned from that experience?*

**JH** Adolph Herseth always had very high expectations of himself and those around him. He worked extremely hard to uphold the standards he set for himself and he was very keen to sense when his colleagues were also putting in that same kind of effort. At the same time, he was unwilling to be a teacher to his professional colleagues in the way he might coach individual students or trumpet sectionals. His concentration in performances was extremely intense and the resulting electricity in his playing could inspire the entire orchestra to perform with heroic commitment.

He would often say to himself in difficult moments: "Well, whatever it takes," which I think was a way for him to keep focusing on the problems to be solved, as opposed to any other distraction or annoyance. He was very kind to conductors and colleagues when he felt they were also prepared and giving their best effort. In a television interview on Chicago's local public broadcasting station (WTTW) after he retired in 2004, his answer to the question of how he wanted to be remembered was "as a halfway decent guy who always did his best." He was surely among the most accomplished instrumentalists of all time, which was the result of his dedication to each day's work.

In my first season playing second trumpet, the CSO had programmed all of the Beethoven Symphonies with Daniel

Barenboim conducting. In the years before I was in the CSO I had heard and read several interviews in which Mr. Herseth was asked what his favourite pieces were to play. The interviewers were always surprised to learn that his answer was not one of the Mahler symphonies or Strauss tone poems, but instead he would always say that good performances of Beethoven symphonies were his favourite moments in the orchestra. I feel fortunate that I was able to prepare and perform all of those symphonies with him. I could literally write a book about what I learned about orchestral playing from sitting next to him that season and perhaps someday I will.

One amusing story that comes to mind happened on the very first day after I auditioned successfully for the second trumpet position in October of 1997. We were rehearsing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as part of the inaugural programme to officially open the CSO's newly constructed *Symphony Center*. In the last movement of that symphony there is a seemingly simple second trumpet solo that is preceded by several bars of rhythmic introduction. If a player is not familiar with the score, that rhythmic introduction sounds like very simple downbeats - but they are actually upbeats. When this section began in rehearsal, Mr. Herseth started to conduct with just his hand and it at first seemed like he was helping me to keep track of the bars before my entrance, something he had never done before that day. I had already studied the score and was very familiar with this passage, so I immediately noticed that he was conducting the upbeats as though they were downbeats! When it was time to play, I picked up my horn and played the passage correctly in relationship to the other parts. He folded his arms and nodded. He was testing me to see if I really knew the score.

In the following seasons I was also fortunate enough to play the first seven Mahler Symphonies sitting next to him, including a recording of Mahler's first symphony on the Deutsche Grammophon label with Pierre Boulez conducting. Those experiences were incredibly inspiring and certainly made all of the hard work and sacrifice I had invested more than worth it! I am now in my seventeenth season as the CSO's second trumpet player. The standards of the orchestra have always been very high and the newer players have continued to improve the quality over the years I have been in the orchestra. Working now side by side with Christopher Martin since he won the principal trumpet position in 2005 has been tremendously enjoyable for me. He regularly plays things so beautifully that it literally can take your breath away. Anyone who has heard the solos he performed as part of

John Williams' recent movie soundtrack for *Lincoln* knows what I am talking about. Working with him is the best part of my job in the CSO.

**PB** *Being a member of one the world's finest orchestras, you have obviously worked with many of the world's greatest conductors. What do you think makes a great conductor?*

**JH** I think that the best conductors are those that can converse musically with the orchestra in the performance. There are some conductors who see an orchestra as merely the medium through which they will instruct a programme to be played precisely as they pre-conceive and dictate. Audiences can sense when an orchestra is being tasked with a *recitation* of the conductor's micromanagement, in the way that each of us can also tell when someone is reading a speech instead of speaking more extemporaneously.

There are some people who have criticized classical orchestral music as static or dead because it is written down, but their premise is false. Standard orchestral repertoire is the platform on which a thoughtfully committed and interactive group of musicians improvise dramatic nuances to convey feelings of urgency, triumph, lament, vulnerability, rage, exuberance and a thousand other shades of emotion that make up the human *life*. The greatest contribution a conductor can make to a group like the Chicago Symphony Orchestra is to show humility and humanity in the way they prepare and perform with the orchestra. To be sure, there are moments when they must address an ensemble or balance problem,

but the technical problem solving aspect of a major symphony orchestra conductor's job is not the main task of their position.

Conductors that can be surrogates for the expression of visceral emotional intelligence in confluence with technical precision and diplomatic humility are those that advance the art of symphonic orchestral performance. Musicians in the CSO are blessed to have experienced great conductors like this, but we also make our best efforts for every other conductor who leads us. No matter what kind of dispositional or technical failing a conductor may have, the CSO has a tradition of collective commitment for making the best music possible in every moment.

Sharing in this commitment is one of the most gratifying parts of being in the orchestra. It is one reason why the symphony orchestra is one of the most wonderful inventions in human history. When people decide to work together to find the common ground of their best efforts, beauty and energy come to life. Personal disagreements and resentments must be put on hold, and the evidence of successful effort materializes when listeners feel musical connection and transformation. Even the most jaded person is unable to resist the energy and inspiration of people working together, freely choosing congruity over chaos. A great conductor is a personification of this understanding.

When Riccardo Muti accepted the CSO's invitation to become our music director, he spoke to us directly and said: "Riccardo Muti does not need the Chicago Symphony

Orchestra. And the Chicago Symphony Orchestra does not need Riccardo Muti. The reason for our work therefore is what we can accomplish *together*." Maestro Muti has improved the quality of the CSO in many ways since he began as our music director in 2010. His musicianship inspires performers as much or more as it does listeners and we have already accomplished several of the goals he has set for our working together. The CSO's recent worldwide webcast of Verdi's *Requiem* shows what I am describing and for anyone who has not yet seen it, the link for viewing it on the CSO's website is: <http://cso.org/res/VerdiRequiem/>

**PB** *John, thanks so much for this series of interviews. They have been so illuminating, informative and inspiring. It's been so good to have such honest and straight-forward views. I look forward to seeing you in Chicago in December.*

**JH** Thank you for your kind words. I'm so honoured that you have featured my thoughts in *The Brass Herald* over these last several issues. Your magazine is a fantastic resource for players at all levels of accomplishment. You have provided so many people with connections and information, and I hope the content I have shared can be helpful to others. No matter what any player or teacher may accomplish for themselves, the most significant work we can do is to pass on curiosity and enthusiasm to those that will come after us. You have done such excellent work in this way and on behalf of all of your many readers we are extremely grateful!

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