

# John Hagstrom in conversation with Philip Biggs

John Hagstrom, member of the trumpet section of the Chicago Symphony and myself continue our conversation about his life as a musician, trumpet designer, inventor of the *Trumpets That Work*/2014 Calendar and much more. Here is the second part.

**PB** John, welcome back to *The Brass Herald*. I would like to say how well the first part of your interview in the August issue was received by readers.

**JH** Thanks Philip. I enjoyed talking with you when you were in Chicago earlier this year and I'm glad that your readers liked the first part of the interview. Second trumpet players are usually in the background, so it's a great honour for me to be featured in *The Brass Herald* again!

**PB** Since then you have kindly sent me a preview copy of the 2014 calendar you produced - *Trumpets That Work*. May I congratulate you on an excellent product. I think it would be great if you could outline the calendar and the concept behind the 2014 edition.

**JH** I have a collection of well over 200 trumpets. Every trumpet player has a story about every trumpet they own, and I have stories about all of mine too. Many of them are linked with a particular player and/or type of music. I thought it would be interesting to weave a few of those narratives together so other players could have more information about famous trumpeters and trumpet makers. Several of the trumpets featured in the 2014 calendar are also part of Chicago Symphony Orchestra history.

I can go on and on talking about various players and makers, which eventually gets to be more than most other people really want to hear. A calendar is a good format for making the amount of information about each instrument more concise and it also limits the number of

instruments since it's tied to the number of months in a year. The feedback I have gotten from the 2013 *Trumpets That Work* calendar has been that the amount of history and detail is enjoyable and informative without being overwhelming. I aspire to eventually possess those same qualities myself!



John Hagstrom has been a member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's trumpet section since 1996.

I have also added into the 2014 calendar the birthdays of the players associated with the featured instruments and birthdays for the vast majority of trumpeters who have ever been members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. This may seem like a small detail, but within the calendar format it opens the door to looking at a much larger portion of trumpet history all at once. It feels good to believe that everything in the present has been perfectly built on the past and is better than it ever has been before, but within the history of trumpet making and trumpet playing, it turns out to be a much different story.

**PB** Is there an example that comes to mind of what you are describing?

**JH** Well, a good example might be studying trumpet manufacturing. This history reveals that many great ideas were abandoned because they could not be sustained economically. Many of the best trumpet designs ever built came from one player's passion to solve a problem they were having with their instrument. Expanding those solutions into a large-

scale manufacturing and commercial success has always been a difficult path, and sometimes the greatest design improvements are not continued because it is too difficult to sustain their inclusion within a larger scale business model.

There are also parallels between the business cycles of manufacturers and the professional careers of famous players. In both instances it is extremely difficult to sustain quality over many years, and the insights for how to do that must be reinvented over and over again. Unexpected turns for the better or worse are a timeless part of professional players' lives, and the commitments of famous players to become accomplished and remain strong over a lifetime is something we can all learn from. In the calendar narratives I try to tell about noted players in order to acquaint the reader with their legacies and lessons. The title - *Trumpets That Work* - is therefore a bit of a play on words in that it simultaneously refers to instruments that are well designed, but also to the players who have worked hard to be professionally successful.

**PB** Do you have plans to further develop the calendar in future years?

**JH** Yes! I still have lots of instruments that will be great to showcase and a number of trumpeters who have seen the 2013 calendar have offered a few of their instruments to feature in upcoming years. I'm also planning to have parallel web pages built on my website ([www.trumpetmultimedia.com](http://www.trumpetmultimedia.com)) for each instrument in the 2015 calendar. The research I have done to uncover more information about each instrument has taught me so much that I never knew before and could not fit into the current calendars. Eventually I would like to create a full-colour book that can combine all of the instruments featured in all of the calendars. That will be lots of work, but lots of fun too.

**PB** I know teaching is so close to your heart and so important to you. Could you tell *Brass Herald* readers about your vast teaching experience?

**JH** That's a big subject! The most important single thing I think I can say about teaching is that ultimately it is a gift. Money may change hands, but within the most meaningful moments of learning, both the teacher and the student have a deeper awareness that what they are experiencing is much more than a service that is paid for and rendered.

It is also a gift that can only really be repaid by passing it on to others. The money paid for a teacher's time directly,



John Hagstrom has produced a 2014 calendar that features pictures of and stories about famous trumpets and trumpeters.

or for a school's tuition bill do not fully repay the debt that is owed for the efforts made by dedicated teachers on behalf of their students. I have had the good fortune of many great experiences learning from some very giving teachers. The years I have spent teaching other players have had behind them the intention to repay the kind investments made in me. My motivation has not been the hope to be seen as a good teacher, but rather only to do my best to help players work effectively from their current level of strength and skill toward something better.

**PB** *Developing excellent skill as a teacher takes many years. Can you tell us about the beginnings of your teaching career?*

**JH** My first experience as a teacher was 25 years ago when I was the graduate teaching assistant at Wichita State University, teaching non-majors and local high school students. I can't say how much any of the students learned from me, but what I learned from them was that in order to be helpful to them I needed first to be able to understand what they hoped to achieve, how they currently perceived their strengths and weaknesses, and how hard they were willing to work to make improvements. When I teach now, I still start by trying to learn these same things about each student. It has been my experience, both as a student and as a teacher, that when the teacher makes the extra effort to see what the student's initial sensibilities are, there will be a much greater chance for discovering a pathway toward lasting improvement.

When I left the Marine Band in 1995, Wichita State University's trumpet teacher had left suddenly at the end of their school year. The school needed a teacher but because of the late point in the academic calendar, the law required them to hire a replacement for just one year. This way during that year they would have the time to do a more complete search for a permanent candidate. Most other schools have a similar policy when there is inadequate time to do a thorough candidate search.

To make a long story short, I was hired into that temporary position, but also was eventually chosen for the permanent tenure-track position. Wichita State University is a very good school. The tradition there is that most of the instrumental faculty members are also employed as principal players in the Wichita Symphony Orchestra. Part of my interview process there was an audition for the WSO's music director too. My experience playing principal trumpet in the Marine Band gave me an advantage over other candidates who had never had a full-time performing career.



**John Hagstrom was a member of "The President's Own" United States Marine Band from 1989 to 1995. John is pictured here with the band's 26th Director, Timothy Foley.**

The reason I say all of this is that the skills and success I subsequently developed as a teacher came primarily from my experience as a working professional player. I needed to learn how to best match my experience with the needs of each particular student. I have gotten better at that with each passing year. I enjoy helping students, but I also feel very strongly that the best teaching helps a student to eventually become as autonomous as possible. I strive to sustain a student's progress via the *self-evidence* of what I help them observe.

**PB** *It sounds like you are invested in the holistic quality of education instead of a pedigree. Could you tell us about how you came to this thinking and some of the alternative forms of learning that could be valuable to students?*

**JH** Adolph Herseth used to say: "There are no good teachers - just good students." He credited this quote to Georges Mager, the Boston Symphony's principal trumpet player from 1921 to 1950 and with whom he studied at the New England Conservatory after he got out of the United States Navy at the end of World War II. I interpret that quote to mean that the best lesson I can pass on to others is the way *I also* learn as a student. If I am successful in that effort, they have learned a level of autonomy and accountability that will facilitate their continued development. Herseth was privately cynical about teachers he observed preening themselves with how many of their students had won awards and professional positions, as though they had created the students' accomplishments themselves.

I think that many teachers don't start out intending to showcase themselves, but

the evaluation system their school may use for granting faculty tenure and promotions may force them to be more like that than they might otherwise prefer. When schools judge teachers mainly by the accomplishments of their students, it is not difficult to see how teachers might start to judge themselves and each other by the track record of their students. There are many teachers who are every bit as helpful and effective as their counterparts at the best music schools, but the students their schools attract may not be as advanced as the students at the more renowned schools.

Getting a great education is possible at any school as long as there are competent teachers and conscientious students. The most successful trumpet players I know got where they are because of their own tenacity and ingenuity in effectively imitating good role models. They are people who have continued to seek out information and set goals for themselves over the course of their entire lives. They have learned how to be *good students*.

I feel that the most helpful insight we can give young players aspiring to become professionally accomplished is to help them see that whether they get into the best music school or not, they can still become every bit as capable if they learn to become good students *wherever they are*. It takes many more years of training and experience to become a mature musician than what any player can learn while in school. Even the players that win jobs right out of *any* school have so much more to learn to become fully mature as musicians and instrumentalists.

**PB** *You mentioned Mr. Herseth. Could you talk a little more about what you know about his educational experiences?*

**JH** Adolph Herseth was not joking when he would often tell others how lucky he felt to have gotten into the CSO and to have kept his job for so many years. When he started in 1948, he had virtually no orchestral playing experience. He knew that only by learning very quickly would he have any chance for professional survival. He told stories about how initially his second trumpet player, Gerald Huffman, would give him input for how to better fit into the orchestra. He acknowledged later that Huffman's input was crucial for his early success. Herseth also told stories about how working side by side while in the US Navy with a lead trumpet player named Gunnar Sorenson taught him a huge amount about building strength and endurance prior to joining the CSO. Herseth's mother had opera records playing constantly in their home growing up. He cited that as a great education for becoming familiar with renowned vocal



John Hagstrom with CSO Music Director Riccardo Muti during the CSO's 2007 European tour. Photo: Todd Rosenberg

styles. When he was a student at the New England Conservatory, he remembered learning as much or more from the Boston Symphony Orchestra's second trumpeter, Marcel Lafosse, than he did from his primary teacher, Georges Mager.

As a CSO member, Herseth also took it upon himself to learn to play the piccolo trumpet in the 1950's, when most orchestral players were not attempting that at all. In the 1960's he began to experiment and master his abilities to play the German rotary valve trumpets. The CSO subsequently became the first American orchestra to perform and record on those instruments in the latter half of the 20th century. He assisted Renold Schilke (CSO trumpet section member 1936-1951) in the 1960's and 1970's to develop and optimize trumpets in higher keys, including Schilke's legendary P5-4 piccolo and E3L Eb/D trumpet designs. Herseth soloed with the CSO playing those instruments more than 50 times. He was still practicing and trying new things even after he retired completely from the CSO in 2004.

The reason I bring up all of these particular details is to make the point that Adolph Herseth was a great musician and trumpeter because he had initially learned how to be a *good student* of all of the experiences and potential opportunities he encountered. His success belonged to him and not to any one of his teachers. Had he never become a professional trumpet player, that occurrence would likewise not have been the *fault* of any of those circumstances either. It is an important point for students aiming for admission into any particular school to see accordingly that their

proximity to a school or teacher is not the most important thing to strive for in the long term.

A wise young player will keep working conscientiously and honestly no matter how much or little professional success they may have after completing formal schooling. I learned a tremendous amount of necessary information as a student at Eastman and at Wichita State, but the progress that gave me the strength and poise to be successful in a job in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra came from the work I did in the years after I finished school to invest more time to develop what I already knew. I continue to learn and develop as much as possible, even with my position in the CSO long since secured.

**PB** Am I correct in saying that at this moment you are not undertaking any teaching?

**JH** That's correct. I am not teaching regular trumpet lessons or working as a faculty member at any school. When I came to Chicago to join the CSO, I accepted a teaching position at DePaul University and I continued there for over 12 years. I will always be proud of the work I did there with many students over that time, but I was continuing to expand the time I was giving to improve and sustain the trumpet classes there to the point that it seemed unlikely I would ever have time to complete some other projects I always wanted to pursue. Therefore, I made the difficult decision in 2008 to stop teaching at DePaul.

In 2004 I started a company called *TrumpetMultimedia* to contain all of the different things I hope to create in the coming years. The 2013 and 2014 calendars are the first formal product offerings, but I have some really interesting things that are in the works, including a trumpet warm-up video system that I patented in 2011. I have continued to taper down my trumpet lesson teaching in favour of new projects, and this decision has also helped me to

improve as a musician and as a trumpet player as much or more than during the years prior.

Also in 2011, Chicago's local PBS station (WTTW) asked me to assist in writing and producing/recording all new theme and end credit music for their nightly news hour, *Chicago Tonight*. In that year I performed a solo tour to Asia on Yamaha's behalf to showcase the trumpets I have helped them to design. I have also been soloing with various groups locally and nationally. I performed with the United States Marine Band several times in 2010 both in Washington D.C. and in Chicago, and in January of 2014 I will be soloing with and conducting the brass section of the Staff Band of the Norwegian Armed Forces in Oslo, Norway.

I have also been helping the CSO to revise and expand their music education advocacy programme called *Dream Out Loud*, which uses print and video materials to encourage young students to continue their commitment to play an instrument. For more information about the programme and to have posters sent to any school, please go to [www.cso.org/dreamoutloud](http://www.cso.org/dreamoutloud). From the feedback I get from public school music teachers, I've learned that lots of students who quit playing may not have quit if they had had just a bit more encouragement and better understood the benefits musical study can provide.

*Dream Out Loud* currently features five CSO musicians from the orchestra and chorus. Each of them shares their personal story growing up with many of the same challenges young players today still face. They give advice and encouragement for practicing and staying committed to musical study with or without aspirations to become professionally accomplished. Over two thousand teachers have requested and received these materials from the CSO since this programme was started in 2007.

I have no doubt that I will someday return to a greater amount of teaching.



Testing and adjusting Bb and C trumpets with Bob Malone at Yamaha's factory in Hamamatsu, Japan in 2011.

I'm still working on several educational projects, but for now I'm really enjoying the other things I have been able to do with the time I had formerly devoted to teaching trumpet lessons and classes. Another example is the development and completion of Yamaha's "next generation" Chicago Artist Model C trumpet, which was helped greatly because I could devote much more time to the steps involved to engineer and test it alone and in the context of playing it in the orchestra.

**PB** Yes, let's talk about the brand new Yamaha Chicago Artist Model C, which has become available this year. This must have been a culmination of so much work.

**JH** That's true. It's no secret that both the original and the "next generation" Yamaha Chicago Artist Model C trumpets are intended to incorporate the best qualities of the CSO-owned set of Vincent Bach Mt. Vernon C trumpets into a trumpet that also has superior intonation, response and efficiency. The first step toward accomplishing that was to create a trumpet that feels very comfortable to play as a solo instrument and then testing it in the context of playing it in the orchestra. Many prototypes that sounded great as solo instruments ultimately failed to be preferable choices to blend with and compliment the other instruments in the orchestra. The process was not complete until we could create an instrument that was not just an acceptable choice. It had also to be a *preferable* choice.

In 2003 after about three years of this kind of development and testing, I started playing the prototype of the original model in the CSO. The production model came out in 2004, but we never stopped working on ways to improve the original Chicago Artist Model C trumpet design. Initially we were working on improvements that are formally called "running changes". These were relatively small details, including the switch in 2005 from felt pads to the current rubber material and a few years later to the way the pistons were built.

More recently we determined that in order to dramatically improve the orchestral projection of this model, it was necessary to change a few of the bell taper specifications. Yamaha accordingly invested in building several new bell mandrels to create the new bell shape. Along with that came changes in the lead pipe, valve casing, braces, tuning slide, valve caps and other parts too. In fact, there are only a few parts that are the same as the original Chicago Artist Model C trumpet. All of these recent improvements are part of the "next generation" model that is now available for sale.

Many professional players have already switched to this new model. It has been difficult for Yamaha to keep up with the demand. I have always been extremely impressed with the consistency of their manufacturing quality. The process they have designed to build this trumpet yields the most consistent results I have ever seen in any production trumpet I have ever played. It's really amazing.

**PB** Does your working relationship with Bob Malone remain as close as ever?

**JH** Yes. I'm always learning something new from Bob. We are in almost constant communication about some detail concerning trumpet development and testing. Bob has done so many experiments and made so many innovations over the last 30 years that are all part of a menu of possible options to combine in a new trumpet design.

Bob overhauled my C trumpet for the first time when I was a student in 1986. As a result, I started to improve much more rapidly and I began calling him regularly to ask about his latest discoveries. Bob would always take the time to share with me his thoughts and how he was making sense of the results he was getting from various experiments. In addition to learning about his specific experiments, he also taught me how to experiment effectively on my own setting up variables individually and in groups. All of that knowledge has helped us to work together effectively now for over 27 years!

**PB** You seem to be a musician and a person who doesn't stop or get diverted from the pursuit of perfection.

**JH** I suppose that is true about me, but I think lots of musicians are that way. Some people are more public about their standards and ambitions and others are more private. I think I'm somewhere in the middle. "Perfection" is a moving target that is elusive no matter how accomplished one becomes. One of the ideas Arnold Jacobs used to introduce to students was to imagine the sound of a piece of music played better than it had ever been played before. He inspired students to reach for an imagined sound over just making sure not to make any mistakes. Of course, it is impossible to know for sure how well any piece of music has ever been played, but the aspiration toward something better than what the player has ever heard themselves inspires a creative ideal that is perhaps

more satisfying to measure oneself against. I try to think in those terms to keep myself positively energized, but also compassionate in recognizing when I have done all I can do at that moment, knowing that I will keep striving as my standards and creativity grow.

There is another brand of perfectionism that can get us into a bit of trouble with others, which is if we push them too hard toward the same standards we are trying to uphold. In the instance of designing a superior trumpet, that may be a good way to proceed for the best results, but working effectively within a musical group requires each person to support one another's best *intentions*, rather than reacting only to the each person's *output*. Even when we feel very justified in being dismissive of another person, it is almost never a good idea to impose your ideas or standards on them beyond a polite suggestion or inquiry. I think we have all made mistakes in this way.

When I was much younger and played in the United States Marine Band, I was much more outspoken than I am now given frustrating situations and I learned some important lessons about how to contribute effectively to a group without burning bridges with others. I wish I had done a few things differently back then, but the lessons I learned there have saved me from missteps I may otherwise have made in the CSO.

One of the most formative experiences for me in the Marine Band was when Arnold Jacobs taught a week of lessons and master classes for the band in the summer of 1991. I had the chance to ask him about his frustrations about working for Fritz Reiner (CSO music director 1953-1963) who was notorious for treating players unkindly without warning. Mr. Jacobs told me that he would sometimes get so upset with Reiner that he was tempted to confront him publicly in rehearsal. However, he told me that he also had a policy of waiting to do that until at least one day had passed. I still clearly

remember his exact words: "I told myself that I would come back the next day and if I still felt as upset I would kick him in the butt...but I never did!" He told me that his waiting always turned out to help him find a different, and better - way to handle the situation. As a result he preserved a positive working relationship with Reiner - and everyone else! I have tried to follow his advice. I have never regretted a more patient and measured approach to interacting with others.

**PB** I'm hugely impressed by your candid approach and honesty regarding commercial matters. If you don't believe in something, I think you say it as it is.



John Hagstrom performing the Hummel Trumpet Concerto in 2008 on the Yamaha YTR-9636 Eb trumpet, an instrument he helped to design.

Photo: Todd Gustafson

**JH** If you mean that I refuse to take money for endorsing an instrument or other music product, you are correct. I think that there is nothing wrong with other individuals having a different approach to this issue, but in my particular situation I feel that I must have the freedom to play the equipment that best accomplishes my role as a second trumpeter. Professional players on any instrument who have the job of playing the second parts do not have the same degree of freedom that a principal player may have to choose a specific kind of sound with which to play. We don't think of the sound any professional quality instrument has as being "good" or "bad", but rather one that most effectively compliments the principal player and the rest of the orchestra.

Matching the principal trumpet player and optimally fitting into the sound of the CSO must be my top priority. Over the years I have been in the orchestra, I have changed equipment several times to fit changing circumstances. More specifically, all of the trumpets I play in the CSO are not made by Yamaha, though many of them are. I also must say that playing the second part at the highest possible level in an orchestral brass section requires one to match optimally not only with the *higher* brass parts, but also with the *lower* brass voices and the rest of the orchestra. Some trumpets may perfectly match the first trumpet player, but if they are not also

well suited to double voices in the horn and trombone sections, I know I must keep searching for a better companion to the sounds around me.

I think it is helpful to think of testing an instrument in the orchestra like one might think of testing a key to see if it fits into a lock. You can copy a key that you know already works in the lock and you would swear that the new key you have made is a much nicer version of the old key - but everyone has had the experience of trying a newly copied key in an old lock only to find that it doesn't work at all! The only way to know for sure if the "key" is worth anything is to test it in the "lock". This step is necessary before any claims can credibly be made for a new instrument's design and it is why the Yamaha instruments I have worked on have been so successful.

I think one of the greatest privileges of playing in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra is the chance to work with so many players who are very sensitive to the way all of our sounds fit together. Many people think of the CSO primarily for the star soloists within its ranks. While there are certainly many great musical leaders in the group, for me, each player's commitment to find a common sound with players who are also at the same time so musically creative is what truly puts the orchestra in the top tier of the world's symphonic ensembles.

**PB** *We have talked so much about so many subjects. It is obvious to me that you really love the medium of the symphony orchestra. Why do you think this is such a worthwhile cause to dedicate yourself?*

**JH** I believe that the enjoyment of a large ensemble of excellent musicians comes from the listener's sense that the players on stage are working together to find the best of their collective efforts instead of working against one another. The evidence of their success is the beauty and transformational energy everyone listening can feel. It seems these days that so many institutions are in gridlock because of the difficulty of working in concert. A great symphony orchestra is a light in the dark when players demonstrate the power of finding a unified common ground that creates beauty and restores humanity.

Riccardo Muti, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's current music director, misses no opportunity to speak to our local and international audiences about the power that this kind of musical example can set for a world that seems increasingly fragmented and disconnected. It's a great opportunity to be part of this orchestra and to be a musician anywhere bringing artistry and beauty to as many listeners as possible.

**PB** *John, thanks so much. I'm already looking forward to the next interview in the December issue.*



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