

Conference report on “Le Serpent sans Sornettes”  
Paris, 6-7 October 2011  
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On 6-7 October 2011 a scholarly symposium entitled “Le Serpent sans Sornettes” devoted to the serpent was held in Paris. Organized by Florence Getreau, Cécile Davy-Rigoux and Volny Hostiou, and sponsored by the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), the Institut de recherche sur le patrimoine musical en France (IRPMF) and the Société Française de musicologie (SFM), the event was held at the Musée de l’Armée (Hôtel des Invalides) and featured presentation of scholarly papers and three concerts. I was pleased to have been invited to present a paper and organize one of the concerts.

The symposium built on the success of the 2009 symposium held at Kloster Michaelstein, Germany, “The Cornett: History, Instruments and Construction.” The serpent, by virtue of its being considered as the “bass of the cornetto family” managed to get grandfathered into the cornetto conference, with the presentation of several papers relating to it, and a recital of serpent duets by Volny Hostiou and myself. With this recent event in Paris, the serpent was given pride of place, with the presentation of 17 papers on the serpent and three concerts that featured serpent players Volny Hostiou, Michel Godard, Michel Nègre, Patrick Wibert and myself.

To say that this event was the most significant and important event in the over 400 year history of the serpent would be a profound understatement. Paris was the ideal location for the conference, and the setting – only steps away from Napoleon’s tomb and in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower – was inspiring. The conference facility – Auditorium Austerlitz at the Musée de l’Armée – was first rate, with a fine projector and sound system and a superb support staff, and a comfortable environment for both presenters and audience. Free and open to the public, the symposium and the concerts were both well attended, with capacity audiences throughout.

That this event found resonance in such a broad based audience of scholars, musicians and the general public was heartening. The serpent was presented “sans sornettes” (“without nonsense”). Long the butt of jokes in its over 400 year history, the symposium was a celebration of the best the serpent has brought to the musical world and in a sense set it up for the future.

The papers that were presented were grouped in broad categories: History and Church Music in France, Teaching and Pedagogy, Iconography and Manufacturing, and the use of the serpent in Military, Symphony, and Opera. All but two papers – those presented by me and Sabine Klaus – were given in French, but the use of images in the presentations gave all present a good sense of the discussion. Among some highlights were Benny Sluchin’s presentation on serpent method books of the 18th and 19th century, Bruno Kampmann’s discussion of the evolution of serpent shapes (to which he brought several examples from his extensive collection that I played and demonstrated for the audience), Jean-Yves Haymoz’s discussion of *chant sur la livre* and improvisation, demonstrated by Volny Hostiou and a small group of chant singers, and a round table that included Volny Hostiou, Michel Godard, and myself in which we discussed the future of the serpent. Throughout the symposium, breaks were met with refreshments in the Salle Turenne where three serpent makers – Nicholas Perry of Christopher Monk Instruments, Stephan Berger of Wetter/Berger Serpents and Pierre Ribo, a new serpent maker in Belgium – displayed their instruments and mouthpieces and the sound of serpents being tried and tested filled the room. Conference attendees were an international group, with presenters and participants from France, England, Scotland, USA, Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland.

The papers – which are slated to be published in a forthcoming proceedings – were inspiring in their breadth and scope, while the concerts provided verification of the serpent’s important role in history and

the secure place it has in the future of music.

It would not be an overstatement to say that the weekend's first concert, "L'Aigle et le Serpent, un mariage sacré" was a tremendously inspiring event. The setting was the Cathédrale Saint-Louis des Invalides, the ornate sacred space that was the location for the premiere of Berlioz's Requiem and is connected to the great dome that is the resting place of Napoleon I. The setting was nearly overwhelming in its beauty, but it was the music that had the greatest power on the audience. The program featured two vocal groups, Ensemble Vox Cantoris and Ensemble Les Meslanges. Each ensemble featured a serpent player – Michel Nègre and Volny Hostiou – and the concert included sacred music of the 17th and 18th centuries for voices, serpent, organ, and cornetto. The beauty of the music was undeniable and the performances were absolutely superb. The audience sat in rapt attention throughout – the thought of applause after each number was impossible given the fact that we all felt transported to a church service and our thoughts turned upward. At the conclusion, the cathedral burst into a prolonged and thunderous ovation in gratitude not only to the performers, but for the great tradition of serpent playing that informed what we had just heard. Volny (who played his new Wetter/Berger serpent) and Michel (who played an historical church serpent) were models of fluid playing, pure tone, and inspired musicality.

The second program, a pre-lunch concert held in the historic Salle Turenne in the Musée de l'Armée on the second day, was by Michel Godard and Linda Bsiri. Those familiar with Michel's playing know that he has single-handedly moved the serpent out of its historical context into the 20th and 21st centuries through his creative partnerships with jazz, avant-garde and new music forms. Linda Bsiri, Michel's long time musical partner, has appeared on many of his recordings, bringing her remarkable vocal talents (and enthusiastic new direction tromba marina playing) to collaborate with the serpent. The program was a free improvisation that included chant, singing, recitation of poetry, drama, synthesis of electronic guitar and bass and more. Suffice to say the audience was mesmerized and enthralled by this spectacular and creative display of musicianship from Michel (who played both his wood and carbon fiber serpents by Wetter/Berger) and Linda.

The conference concluded with a joint recital in Salle Turenne that featured the serpent in two distinct worlds. An ensemble of faculty and students from the Conservatoire (CCR) in Rouen presented a program with me of 18th and 19th century *harmonie musik* that included serpent. My paper, "Quires and Bands: The Serpent in England," discussed works for serpent with winds by Samuel Wesley, Christopher Ely and Joseph Haydn, so marches by those composers were included on the program, as well as two Divertimenti attributed to Haydn (Hob. II: 26 and 44) employing the serpent. In this performance, I used my c. 1812 serpent by Baudouin, and in a sense the instrument "came home" to France for this performance. This concert had been given in Rouen earlier in the week, and the audience responded enthusiastically to this presentation of music for serpent with winds, and particularly to the performance of a march by Carl Andreas Goepfert that was dedicated to Napoleon as First Consul. The concert concluded with a new piece by Benjamin Attahir, *Al Aacha*, for serpent – Patrick Wibert – with string quartet, flute and clarinet performed by Ensemble La Balcon. Patrick's is a new name on the serpent landscape, and this young player's prodigious talents were in full display in this extraordinarily difficult work in a contemporary style. The performance was riveting, and the contrast between old and new could not have been more sharply in focus.

The Symposium was, in sum, a dramatic success. Congratulations and thanks must go to the event's organizers and all who participated as presenters and concert musicians. When we think back over the last

40 years of the modern serpent revival – beginning with Christopher Monk, the London Serpent Trio, the Amherst Early Music Festival, the Serpent Celebration and Festival of 1989 and 1990, the Serpentariums, an increasing number of modern makers, a plethora of recordings and now, this first scholarly conference devoted to the instrument – it is remarkable to see how the serpent has so rapidly moved from “sornettes” to respectability. With a new generation of superb serpent players informing both old and new music, and scholars devoted to analyzing every aspect of serpent use, manufacture and pedagogy, we can look forward to the serpent’s next 400 years with anticipation, and will look back at this colloquium as an important milestone along the way.