

CHRISTOPHER MONK: 1921-1991 THE PUREST SERPENTIST

by Clifford Bevan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

During the 80's he developed his sackbuts and natural trumpets (with Ted Kirby),

then the flat trumpet (with Andrew Pinnock). The instruments were built by Frank Tomes. But it was the serpent with which he was inevitably to be most closely identified.

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

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

This sinuous selection of Gilbertian paradoxes appealed immensely to Christopher Monk. And inevitably it led, via concerts, recordings and tours (three of them to the United States) through the memorable First International Serpent Festival in South Carolina, in 1987, to his glorious swansong: the 1990 Serpent Celebration in London.

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

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

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

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