

*Reprints from the*

# International Trumpet Guild® Journal

*to promote communications among trumpet players around the world and to improve the artistic level of performance, teaching, and literature associated with the trumpet*

## THOUGHTS ON HISTORIC BRASS PERFORMANCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH STANLEY CURTIS

BY ELISA KOEHLER

January 2008 • Page 24

---

The International Trumpet Guild® (ITG) is the copyright owner of all data contained in this file. ITG gives the individual end-user the right to:

- Download and retain an electronic copy of this file on a single workstation that you own
- Transmit an unaltered copy of this file to any single individual end-user, so long as no fee, whether direct or indirect is charged
- Print a single copy of pages of this file
- Quote fair use passages of this file in not-for-profit research papers as long as the ITGJ, date, and page number are cited as the source.

The International Trumpet Guild® prohibits the following without prior written permission:

- Duplication or distribution of this file, the data contained herein, or printed copies made from this file for profit or for a charge, whether direct or indirect
- Transmission of this file or the data contained herein to more than one individual end-user
- Distribution of this file or the data contained herein in any form to more than one end user (as in the form of a chain letter)
- Printing or distribution of more than a single copy of the pages of this file
- Alteration of this file or the data contained herein
- Placement of this file on any web site, server, or any other database or device that allows for the accessing or copying of this file or the data contained herein by any third party, including such a device intended to be used wholly within an institution.

<http://www.trumpetguild.org>

**Please retain this cover sheet with printed document.**

# THOUGHTS ON HISTORIC BRASS PERFORMANCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH STANLEY CURTIS

BY ELISA KOEHLER

**A**t a recent concert in Richmond, Virginia, trumpeter Stanley Curtis accomplished the impressive feat of performing demanding repertoire on both cornett and natural trumpet as well as a modern reproduction of a *tromba da tirarsi* [slide trumpet]. As a member of the U.S. Navy Band in Washington, D.C., Curtis maintains an active performance schedule on the modern trumpet and its ancestors in addition to serving on the trumpet faculty of George Mason University. Since 2002 he has chaired the Baroque Division of the National Trumpet Competition (USA). Curtis earned degrees from the

University of Alabama (B.M.) and the Cleveland Institute of Music (M.M.), and just completed his doctorate in trumpet performance at Indiana University. He studied in the Netherlands with famed Baroque trumpeter Friedemann Immer on a Fulbright Scholarship and was a prizewinner at the First International Altenburg Competition for Baroque Trumpet in 1996. His many performance credits include appearances with the Milwaukee Baroque, the Orchestra of the 17th Century, the Washington Bach Consort, and the Nederlandse Kantori.

**Koehler:** *What sparked your interest in the natural trumpet and cornett?*

**Curtis:** I suppose that I have been interested in antiques and curious artifacts since I was a young boy. I enjoyed taking a “tour” with my grandparents or great aunt to hear about and see their antique furniture. But I saw a natural trumpet for the first time when I was about 16 years old. I took lessons from the late Michael Johnson, trumpet teacher at the University of Alabama. Mike had a Meinel and Lauber Tarr Model hanging on his wall that I was very curious about. Later, when I was studying with Mike as an undergraduate student at the University of Alabama, I did a research and performance project on the natural trumpet. For this course I read *Altenburg’s Trumpeters’ and Kettledrummers’ Art* and Don Smither’s *The Music and History of the Baroque Trumpet before 1721*, and I made a modern edition of a Kroměříž anonymous sonata for 2 trumpets, 2 cornetts, and 3 trombones with organ. I also played a small recital of Baroque trumpet music—on piccolo trumpet, unfortunately. Nevertheless, I did try to play a few things on the natural trumpet. Modern orchestra playing held my interest for the next seven or eight years—while I got my masters degree from the Cleveland Institute of Music, took three years of course work at Indiana University for a doctorate degree, and then worked for two years teaching at the University of Evansville and playing in the Evansville Philharmonic. For some reason—probably living in near-poverty!—I decided to return to Indiana to finish my course work. But at that point in my life, I was growing weary of orchestral excerpts played on a Bach C trumpet, and Bach played on a Benge piccolo trumpet. I wanted to try something new. I had a friend who had bought a Baroque trumpet from Richard Seraphinoff (now associate professor of horn at I.U.). My friend no longer wanted this instrument, so he traded his Baroque trumpet for



Stanley Curtis with cornett and natural trumpet in hand.

my student-model Yamaha flugelhorn. That was a great trade. I played a few pieces for Stanley Ritchie, to see if he was interested in programming Baroque trumpet pieces for his Baroque Orchestra at I.U., and he really went for it! He included me on every concert that year. I even played the Brandenburg Concerto a couple of times. I also studied with Rick Seraphinoff on Baroque trumpet and cornett. You see, I had bought a used

Christopher Monk resin cornett without any leather covering for \$30 that year. That was a pretty good deal, too. In the meantime, I had applied for a Fulbright to study Baroque trumpet with Friedemann Immer in Holland, and that came through. Then my real education began under this very remarkable trumpeter. I learned so much that year; I only wished I could have stayed longer.

**Koehler:** *Which instrument did you study first, the natural trumpet or the cornett?*

**Curtis:** The Baroque trumpet came way before the cornett. I really didn’t start learning how to play the cornett correctly until I moved back to the United States and started working with the Washington Cornett and Sackbutt Ensemble.

**Koehler:** *Were there early music programs for brass at the Cleveland Institute or Indiana University?*

**Curtis:** The Cleveland Institute’s focus was on preparing musicians for an orchestral career. I didn’t know much about Case Western’s early music program or teachers when I studied in Cleveland. Indiana University, of course, is very famous for its Early Music Institute. I didn’t pursue an actual EMI degree at I.U., but I did study with its teachers, including the late and very great Thomas Binckley.

**Koehler:** *What was it like studying with Friedemann Immer?*

**Curtis:** Friedemann would come into Amsterdam about once a month and teach for two to three days at a time—all day long! All of the lessons, except mine, were in German. He

spoke to me in English. Of course, it made no difference, whatsoever, to the Dutch students, who could speak fluently in both. It was a joy to hear him play. He talked a good bit about using your air correctly.

**Koehler:** *Do you find it difficult to switch between modern trumpet, natural trumpet, and cornett?*

**Curtis:** It's not difficult anymore. I find that they complement each other.

**Koehler:** *Who are the makers of the instruments and mouthpieces you currently play?*

**Curtis:** I play on a handmade four-hole Egger with an Ehe bell and a Graham Nicholson 1746 Ehe copy that plays with or without holes and has a slide for *tirarsi* work. I still play my Rick Seraphinoff trumpet, especially on very high keys like E-flat, E, and F. I also made a trumpet without finger holes in the Robert Barclay workshop. So this Barclay trumpet has a seventeenth-century setup with a 1632 Hanns Hainlein bell. I believe it is my most in-tune trumpet, because it does not have an intonation that is too spread. The low notes aren't too flat, nor the high notes too sharp. I play an Andrew Naumann mouthpiece, "C" model on Baroque trumpet, but I also like to play a Bull copy made by Graham Nicholson with a 20 millimeter diameter. It is very challenging!

For cornett, I play a 440 [A=440] Serge Delmas with dark brown leather covering. Not sure about what kind of wood, since I bought this instrument from William Page who plays in the WCSE with me. I also play a used Roland Wilson 466 cornett. I play a Graham Nicholson cornett mouthpiece that I just adore—it's about 16 millimeters in diameter and not overly sharp in the rim. I really don't play the 14 mm. (or smaller) mouthpieces well.

**Koehler:** *Many natural trumpeters and cornettists specialize whereas you play both instruments at an extremely high level on mouthpieces based on historic models. How do you do it?*

**Curtis:** First of all, I have yet to feel comfortable enough on the really big mouthpieces like the Bull to perform high pieces. In addition, I would love to learn how to play the cornett on a smaller mouthpiece with a side embouchure, but I am not sure that will happen. But I can tell you that it is very important to try to play a mouthpiece that is in the realm of historical accuracy and that plays in tune and with a good sound. This is the most important thing in playing early brass. You must live with a mouthpiece a long time before you feel comfortable. I think it takes three to six months for most people to adapt to a dramatically different mouthpiece.

**Koehler:** *Do you find that playing cornett and natural trumpet impacts your playing on the modern trumpet and vice versa?*

**Curtis:** Absolutely, and in a positive way. The cornett lends finesse and lightness to the modern trumpet, whereas the natural trumpet demands strength and endurance which carry over to the modern trumpet.

**Koehler:** *What are some of the most challenging pieces you've performed?*

**Curtis:** On the Baroque trumpet, I have played Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 almost a dozen times. The high notes get a little easier each time. I find various cantatas very demanding, such as the BWV 24, presumably for slide trum-

pet, or the BWV 90, which is for B-flat trumpet and includes swift slurs that imitate the peals of thunder and lightning. I once played the Richter Concerto in D for a masterclass on Baroque trumpet. I find the solo pieces by Dalla Casa and Bassano to be both rewarding and incredibly demanding on the cornett.

**Koehler:** *Your dissertation concerns the use of the cornett as a symbol in Renaissance art. What are some of your findings regarding cornett iconography?*

**Curtis:** I want to first say that my paper deals primarily with Monteverdi's symbolic use of the cornett. But I do set this in the context of a study of general cornett symbolism—not only in the medium of art, but also in literature, and, of course, music. In terms of iconography, I have noticed some interesting trends, such as the depiction of the cornett as a symbol of the transitory pleasures of life in the *Totentanz* art work of the fifteenth century and the *vanitas* art-work of the sixteenth. In addition, the cornett is frequently depicted as a symbol of erotic love by artists such as Caravaggio and others.

**Koehler:** *Do you see an interest in early brass growing in North America?*

**Curtis:** I see interests in early brass, but I don't see the kind of early music programming to sustain this interest. Without work, talented students that might have a proclivity to early music might elect to pursue other avenues such as orchestral music. Of course, in general, all music of artistic worth has been suffering in the U. S. and Canada. With regard to early music, there needs to be a "critical mass" of talent and employment in order to sustain this movement. I see a certain kind of "ossification" of early music style today. As performers, we need to challenge unsupportable assumptions, even if they are part of the "tradition" of the modern revival of early music, and we need to bring the kind of work ethic that this great music deserves. Programmers and managers need to find more employment possibilities for serious early music brass players.

**Koehler:** *You teach natural trumpet at both George Mason University and Catholic University. Do you also teach cornett? How do you approach working with your students?*

**Curtis:** I only rarely teach natural trumpet at George Mason. I normally try to work out basic modern trumpet technical and stylistic concerns for my students there. However, at Catholic, I have taught cornett and natural trumpet to older students on the graduate level who are seeking to add to their overall knowledge of trumpet performance. I like to ask my students what they want to work on, and then we try to get to work on the pieces that really interest them. It's important to start out by playing the natural trumpet without holes, and then we add that later on, if we want to go that direction.

**Koehler:** *Do you think more universities should offer early music programs for brass students?*

**Curtis:** They should, but they also must coordinate these efforts across the board with all instruments, so that ensembles

---

"With regard to early music, there needs to be a "critical mass" of talent and employment in order to sustain this movement."

---

---

"The cornett lends finesse and lightness to the modern trumpet, whereas the natural trumpet demands strength and endurance..."

---

*Continued on Page 29*

of different time periods can play with all the original instruments that are supposed to go with that ensemble.

**Koehler:** *Do you have any advice for trumpeters interested in starting out on the natural trumpet or cornett?*

**Curtis:** Listen to the music of the time period... first, natural trumpeters and cornettists, second other instruments, and then ultimately... listen to singers. Make sure they are enlightened, good singers and imitate them as best as possible. Learn to play in tune—from the beginning to the end of the rehearsal. Learn the correct articulations, and finally, have fun!

**About the Author:** Elisa Koehler is assistant professor of music at Goucher College and the Music Director and Conductor of The Frederick Orchestra. She also performs with the Lyric Brass Quintet, the Orchestra of the 17th Century, and the Washington Cornett & Sackbut Ensemble. 