

CRISPIAN STEELE-PERKINS

“Well, it’s better than working!”

DR COLIN BLOCH

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Crispian Steele-Perkins in August 2022 at his home in Dorking, Surrey

Approaching his seventieth year as a trumpeter, Crispian Steele-Perkins remains eminent as a performer, historian, and collector, combining seriousness with boyish enthusiasm. The ‘trumpeter’s trumpeter’, he was one of the pioneers (along with Edward Tarr, Don Smithers and Michael Laird) of the historic or ‘authentic’ instrument movement, long before it became mainstream. His long career embraces many acclaimed recordings on CD, for TV and film (including *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, and *Bond* movies), playing with artists as diverse as Dame Kiri te Kanawa, Leslie Garrett, Kate Bush and Led Zeppelin, and recording the iconic TV theme to the BBC’s *Antiques Roadshow*ⁱ, heard weekly by more than 7 million viewers. He has appeared as a soloist at London’s Royal Albert Hall, New York’s Carnegie Hall, Boston’s Symphony Hall, Sydney’s Opera House, Tokyo’s Suntory Hall and playing the Haydn concerto before an audience of 133,000 at the Edinburgh International Festival.

Crispian’s indomitable and energetic curiosity has led him into researching, sometimes making, and performing on the full historic range of instruments, including those of the neglected nineteenth century. He has described himself as a ‘musical archaeologist’.

A self-taught schoolboy, he later took lessons with Bernard Brown, a proponent of ‘no-pressure’ playing. Crispian was eventually to succeed him at the Guildhall in London as Professor of Trumpet, for twelve years. It is perhaps his self-taught start that has made him always curious, innovative and adaptive, remaining proud of having no formal qualifications in performance or teaching. He holds unorthodox views on repertoire (arranging and performing music of quality whether or not written for the trumpet), warm-ups (eschewing long-note warmups and daily routines), and technique (a practitioner of low pressure playing). However, his doctrine is not to impose, but instead to encourage others to discover their own pathways.

The BBC’s CD Review, the benchmark of comparative reviews, recommended that of all the available recordings of the Haydn concerto, Crispian’s is “*the one to have*” by “*a performer who has me convinced ... who constantly reveals the multi-faceted nature of the instrument.*”ⁱⁱ He was also described as “*the world’s leading player of the Baroque Trumpet*”ⁱⁱⁱ

Aged 78, when most are daunted by or have succumbed to the challenges of whether and how to continue playing, Crispian’s cheerful indomitability is an inspiration.

His only ageing issue is to overcome the difficulty of an arthritic finger operating a vent hole, which he will do by learning to play an unvented instrument instead.

He is also a motorcycle enthusiast. In August 2022, just a few days after completing this interview, Crispian was involved in a serious motorcycle accident from which he was helicoptered to hospital where he was told he might lose a leg. The very next day he emailed Colin Bloch with characteristic stoicism:

*Dear Colin
I was helicoptered into Brighton hospital yesterday after a nasty motorbike
accident. I have been warned that I might lose my leg.
Out of action for 3 months
Best
C*

But with determination he has recovered and has emerged intact, with his first post-accident concert in Venice, Italy in April 2023. Crispian's popular demonstration-recitals are delivered with erudition, élan, wit and virtuosity, covering the range of instruments and their repertoire from the conch to the piccolo trumpet. John Irish interviewed Crispian for the ITG Journal^{IV} following his performance at ITG Manchester in 2002. This interview is an update and an opportunity for his further reflections. It followed a demonstration-recital in the 15th century Queens' College Chapel in Cambridge before a delighted audience. We spoke at his Surrey home surrounded by just some of his instruments.



The Interview

CB: *What first drew you to the trumpet? Was there a prospect of being other than a musician, and who or what most influenced you in life and/or music?*

CS-P: One of my elder brothers played at school and he complained to my parents that I was always taking his trumpet. I played a tune (When the Saints) straight away aged 9/10. My mother thought I should be a barrister and I never thought seriously about becoming a professional musician. When I joined the National Youth Orchestra aged 16 I enjoyed mixing with people of very different backgrounds from my own, which was in honesty fairly privileged. As to influences, I cannot think of many - I'm 'unimpressable' by nature - but Eddie Calvert was an early influence, someone whose playing I have always admired.

CB: *Relatively early in your career, having played with many of the leading UK orchestras, ensembles and conductors (including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, English National Opera, Gabrieli Brass, the Royal Opera House Orchestra, and conductors Kempe, Dorati, Herreweghe, Barbirolli, Mackerras, Goodall, and Dutoit) you became a soloist, but importantly you were one of the first pioneers to bring into informed performances what were then eccentric and unestablished historic instruments and performances, but which are now commonplace. How did this come about, and what difficulties did you encounter?*

CS-P: My friend Michael Laird needed a second player once Iain Wilson joined the BBC. I had been at the English National Opera from 1966-1973 and made my own piccolo trumpet for Bach's music as a student, long before they were generally manufactured. Baroque music suited me. Michael constructed 'baroque' style vented trumpets at home in his garage (John Eliot Gardiner referred to them as 'radiators!') and nobody else owned one so it was a sellers' market. So-called 'Authentic Early Music' became a trendy fad and we went all over the world playing these contraptions.

CB: *You have a skill and knowledge in and of instruments which are still not commonplace, mainly of the nineteenth century, after natural trumpets and before modern valved instruments. Is there still some way to go to achieve the same understanding and acceptance of this era of instrumentation?*

CS-P: I began collecting old trumpets in the 1970s hoping that the directors of 'Historically Informed' groups would be interested - they weren't, but I was and found that audiences enjoyed hearing about them, how they developed and how different they sound from modern instruments. A perfect example of how directors simply wanted a 'modern' sound upon an instrument that looks old is the famous Funeral Music for Queen Mary by Purcell. Myself, David Blackadder, Sue Addison and Steve

Saunders organised ourselves with a set of 4 'flat' Trumpets as described by contemporary witnesses, very well made by the late Frank Tomes^{vi} and we perfected our performance as seen live on a BBC Prom. Nobody, but nobody, ever appreciated what we achieved by doing this. The instrument is tricky but we got the piece off to our satisfaction. One conductor, Phillippe Herreweghe, tried to replace us with Cornetti (which was not what Purcell had intended) but he had to be persuaded not to; what he wanted was the triumphal version by Thuston Dart with clattering drums and bright modern brass whereas the instruments were described at the time as 'flat, mournful trumpets' - very frustrating.

CB: *You're very well known for your demonstration-recitals, covering the evolution of our instruments from the conch to the piccolo. At Queen's College Chapel in Cambridge recently, a large audience was entertained, enlightened and clearly delighted by your enthusiastic and informed presentation and performance. What makes these events as appreciated as they are by non-trumpeter audiences?*

CS-P: I play only good quality music. If need be, I make arrangements of my own of familiar pieces. The academic repertoire for the trumpet is frankly rather average in quality and as you heard in Cambridge, the public are quite happy to hear Mozart's 'Allelujah' or 'Queen of the Night' aria if played well. I think seeing as well as hearing something as rare as the old keyed trumpet I played Henry Bishop's song on gives a flavour of the past which is uncommon. Communication skills are valuable too - you cannot always teach that. I am often asked what qualifications or degrees I have received and the answer is 'none'. Rather disappointing that my old college, the Guildhall School never gave me any recognition, even after I had been a professor there for 12 years, but the respect of colleagues has been far more valuable.

CB: *Please tell us about some of your pupils who have achieved positions particularly in UK orchestras. I am sure that readers will appreciate comments of yours on teaching from your 2003 interview: "I always thought I was a feeble teacher. Looking back on it, at least I didn't do any harm. ... I felt, as a teacher, that it was up to the people I was teaching to succeed. I used to find within teaching that within three lessons I've told them everything that I know and all I'm going to tell them. All I'm going to do is spend the next three years saying the same things."^{vii}*

CS-P: Yes, of course. These include Paul Benniston (Principal, London Philharmonic Orchestra), Nick Betts, (Principal Royal Opera House, Covent Garden) , Ruth Hogan (ex Sub Principal Royal Opera House), Kate Moore (Principal, BBC Concert Orchestra - a pupil shared with Maurice

Murphy), John Young (Sub Principal, City of London Sinfonia), Andy Gathercole (John Wilson Orchestra), Marion Wilson (Sub Principal, Northern Sinfonia), William Spencer (Clinician, Repairer and Maker), Michael Harrison (English Baroque Soloists), and Andy Bush (freelance and composer).

CB: *You built up an important collection of instruments. What are the most important, and what are you mostly playing on nowadays?*

CS-P: A particularly English instrument was the Slide-Trumpet which evolved from the aforementioned Fflatt Trumpet. Patented in 1789 by John Hyde of the Drury Lane Theatre, it was a natural trumpet with a retractable rear slide which adjusted the harmonics by $\frac{1}{2}$ a tone and in between. It is the perfected Natural instrument with the glorious, traditional, noble tone. My great uncle won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in 1893 to study this with Thomas Harper Junior, so it was used for Classical and Baroque music in England for over a century. I was shown a photo from the 3 Choirs Festival in Hereford Cathedral in 1900 and my great uncle was playing 1st Cornet in the orchestra - 76 years later I sat in the same (1st Cornet) chair in the same building playing my first concert as a member of the Royal Philharmonic!

At one time I had 12 slide trumpets including one from the 1790s. Nobody seemed interested in hearing it so all but one were sold last year - I'm happy to say, all went to other players and not to museums or 'collectors'.

I rarely replace instruments once I have decided to play them. If they aren't going too well one must practice; buying the latest 'fad' trumpet cannot guarantee playing any better unfortunately and, if well maintained, old ones should not develop leaks.

I still play the Bach/ Handel repertoire comfortably on my 1967 Selmer Piccolo (only ever in A), also the Haydn Concerto (and others) on my 1970 Selmer Eb - if they were good enough for Maurice André they were certainly good enough for me. I have a home-made Bb piccolo that I use for the Brandenburg Concerto. I love my (long model) 1930 Bach Stradivarius Cornet and 1972 Bb Stradivarius trumpet. An 1896 Besson Bb Cornet and an unmarked keyed trumpet c1810 also feature in recitals (incidentally, I NEVER had a C trumpet!). My c1840 Frederick Pace copper slide trumpet blows similarly to the c1680 Bull instrument upon which I recorded Shore's Trumpet in 1986, it appears occasionally, and I have a homemade Baroque vented trumpet and homemade Natural trumpet both made out of bits and pieces of the many other instruments which lie dismantled or torn to shreds in my workshop. Both of these also feature in my recitals.

I use original mouthpiece in all of these. Bach 1 & 1/4C in Bb & Eb trumpet, a Hawkes 'cosicup' in both Cornets, and large 'Harper' type c1780 silver rimmed brass mouthpiece in slide and natural trumpet.

CB: *You have an unusual approach to warmups and maintaining 'trumpet fitness'.*

CS-P: If in a confined space such as a studio with other musicians arriving or with keyboards being tuned, I play a simple, short melody quietly on just a mouthpiece. Usually the first note I play I'm being paid for.....i.e. no warm up, straight on the face.

My recitals involve at least 6 totally different instruments with very different sized mouthpieces; I play through pieces on each one daily, switching between them freely.

I never played 'long tones' in my life, some people find it helpful but I never found it so. People tell me I have exceptional breath control (I always played the opening to 'Eternal Source' in one breath - with ease).

Periodically I balance the trumpet on my thumbs and go through the harmonics slowly using the 'No pressure' system; hold the bottom C, then lip up to middle G and hold, then low C, middle G, Middle C and hold.....all the way up to G above high C or as far as you can manage without actually taking hold of the instrument. Beginners can usually only manage 4 harmonics to E but so long as leakage at the side of the embouchure is avoided this can develop strength and endurance over the course of time.

CB: *Is there a particular performance or recording of yours that you best remember? If you were stranded alone on a desert island and could only have with you one recording, and one instrument, which would they be?*

CS-P: In 1986 I recorded an album 'Shore's Trumpet' for EMI featuring an instrument from the Museum of London made in c1680 by William Bull. Upon it I played all the famous tunes such as Prince of Denmark's March using manuscript editions from c1700. Surprisingly, this and other pieces are marked ½ common time, i.e., 2 in a bar, so should be considerably faster than heard nowadays.

Later with Andrew Parrott I recorded Messiah for EMI using a converted Harris Trumpet (c1720) previously owned by Thomas Harper and using it's original (very large) mouthpiece. I am very proud of this recording which certainly sounds different from other so called authentic recordings, but the sleeve notes do not even mention the fact that it is an instrument of historic importance.

On the desert island Shore's Trumpet might be the CD I took but I don't often listen to music anyway. I would take my Frederick Pace Slide Trumpet and thereafter possibly to the grave also!

CB: *You are particularly associated with informed and definitive performances and recordings of the Haydn concerto.*

CS-P: I have recorded this on both valved and keyed trumpets. The 1986 version with the English Chamber Orchestra has an amusing history. The final movement was on the school exam syllabus and an inexpensive recording was needed for students to hear the piece played. As a completely unknown player, I was engaged to record the whole Concerto and 5 others for a budget price CD. Time was limited and we had 2 days (4 three hour sessions) to complete the 6 Concerto album - no time to discuss and ponder, just put the red light on and play each movement through twice and then move on to the next piece. For this reason the recording sounds fresh because it has minimal editing (incidentally, string players hate the key of Eb so are glad to get it out of the way!). Throughout my career I was lucky to have worked with some of the best recording producers and engineers in the world. In my opinion they rarely get the credit they are due. At this time the English Chamber Orchestra was Benjamin Britten's 'in house' orchestra and considered the finest accompanying orchestra in the world (for Daniel Barenboim, Clifford Curzon, Yehudi Menuhin, Murray Pariah, etc).

CB: *If you were starting out now as a young player, would you have hope, despair, or both? What advice would you give to young trumpeters faced with increasing competition, a wider range of repertoire and ensembles, and an expectation to play on a range of instruments?*

CS-P: My generation were extremely fortunate because music was one of the few growth industries in the 1980/1990s. Whilst a member of the Royal Philharmonic I also played for Led Zeppelin, Barclay James Harvest, Cliff Richard, Kate Bush etc. Then the Early Music thing kicked off; I recorded Messiah 17 times and apparently 'Let the Bright Seraphim' 23 times (you'd think I'd get it right by now!). Those days have sadly gone. Freelancing probably requires one to undertake a substantial amount of teaching and permanent orchestras no longer enjoy the lucrative benefits of the recording industry to the same extent. I always said 'Well, it's better than working' and hopefully there will continue to be a market for quality music making so if you really must, then go for it.

CB: *People have said that there could be more to life than trumpeting. Do you have other enthusiasms?*

CS-P: At the same time as starting to play I developed a passion for motorbikes. I bought my first bike when I was 65 and now have 3. An inveterate tinkerer with trumpets, I now fiddle with bikes too. I now have a 1952 Francis-Barnett, Falcon, 197cc 2 stroke; a 2006 Honda (special import) 400cc Street Scrambler (competition bike); and a 2010 Yamaha 250cc commuter bike, economical, reliable, no street credit but all you need to weave in and out of London traffic.

CB: *As older age just begins to appear on the distant horizon, what have you found helpful in maintaining your musical, physical and mental focus and enjoyment? What do you see as the next stage of your career?*

CS-P: I still tinker with instruments on a daily basis, still find pieces to arrange and then have to practice them. I see no need to stop doing my demonstration-recitals except that British roads have become a nightmare due to overcrowding and poor maintenance of infrastructure generally. But, ever the optimist

The low register was never exactly my strong point so solo playing continues to suit me. Operas and symphonies I have long since been happy to leave to others and I never played in a band. Arthritis is threatening to affect the use of the thumb hole on the vented Baroque trumpet so currently I am preparing repertoire which can be comfortably (and confidently?) performed without vents, in other words on a proper Natural trumpet (many people might say 'and about time to'!)



Crispian Steele-Perkins posing with his two favourite instruments, just three days before the motorcycle accident that led to him being helicoptered to hospital and nearly losing a leg.



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Selective Discography, Films and TV

Six Trumpet Concertos: English Chamber Orchestra. M Haydn, J Haydn, Torelli, Telemann, Humphries, Neruda

Antique Brasses: London Gabrieli Brass Ensemble

Bach: Mass in B Minor: The King's Consort

Classical Trumpet Concertos: Hummel, Haydn, Leopold Mozart, Hertel, Michael Haydn

Water Music: Handel, Telemann. The King's Consort

Handel: Alexander Balus. The King's Consort

Handel: Ode For St Cecilia's Day. The King's Consort

Handel: Deborah. And Essential Handel. The King's Consort

Handel: Fireworks Music, Coronation Anthems. The King's Consort

Handel: Fireworks Music, Water Music. The King's Consort

Handel: Joseph and His Brethren. The King's Consort

Handel: Judas Maccabeus. The King's Consort

Handel: Music For Royal Occasions. The King's Consort

Handel: Parnasso in Festa. The King's Consort

Handel: The Occasional Oratorio. The King's Consort

Handel: An Ode For St Cecilia's Day. The King's Consort

Hasse and A Scarlatti. The King's Consort

Italian Baroque Trumpet Music: The Parley of Instruments

Let The Bright Seraphim: Armonico Consort

Purcell: Hail! Bright Cecilia, Who Can From Joy Refrain. The King's Consort

Vivaldi: Concerti Con Molti Istromenti. The King's Consort

Movie Classics with Leslie Pearson

The English Trumpet: Purcell, Clarke, Handel

The Music of Gershwin

Films / TV: More than 80 scores including Jaws, Gandhi, Star Wars IV, Batman, Monty Python's Life of Brian, Lord of the Rings - The Two Towers, and six James Bond films, Antiques Roadshow, The World At War, Dr Who, Oliver Twist, Inspector Morse and Tales of the Unexpected.

Regularly used instruments:

Keyed trumpet, unmarked (c1810)

Frederick Pace copper slide trumpet (c1840)

Baroque vented trumpet (home-made)

Natural trumpet (home-made) Selmer Piccolo used only in A (1967)

Selmer Eb (1970)

Bach Stradivarius Cornet (1930)

Bb Stradivarius trumpet (1972)

Besson Bb Cornet (1896)

Mouthpieces:

Bb ad Eb trumpet: Bach 1 & 1/4C

Cornets: Hawkes 'cosicup' in both Cornets,

Slide and natural trumpet: large 'Harper' type c1780 silver rimmed brass mouthpiece

Also original mouthpieces on period instruments.

ⁱ By Paul Reade and Tim Gibson, played on a piccolo trumpet.

ⁱⁱ Six Trumpet Concertos, with the English Chamber Orchestra (Alto).

ⁱⁱⁱ Continue Magazine 1993, quoted in John Irish, *Crispian Steele Perkins: The King's Trumpeter* ITG Journal June 2003

^{iv} John Irish op. cit. 17

^v 'Fflatt' trumpet is the 17th century spelling describing an instrument capable (using a slide) of also playing in minor (flat) keys.

^{vi} Francis 'Frank' Tomes (1936 - 2011), a player and maker with an avid interest in sculpture, instrument history, and handcraft, a pioneer of making playable authentic replicas of sackbuts and trumpet. The best of his important collection of historic instruments is now found at the Musical Instrument Collection at Edinburgh University.

^{vii} John Irish op. cit. 21