

Rodney Mack in conversation with Philip Biggs

PB: Hi Rodney, it was good to meet you recently in Banff and thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for *The Brass Herald*. This gives me a belated opportunity to congratulate you on your performance in New Jersey in 2006 when you performed a stunning Arutunian.

RM: No really Philip, thank you for asking me to do an interview. I have always been a big fan of your magazine. You help us brass players keep tabs on one another! I'm glad you enjoyed the Arutunian - it's always a challenge to solo at the International Trumpet Guild Conference because you know that most of the folks in the audience know the piece you are doing inside and out!

PB: I believe you were born in New Orleans and took lessons with your cousin Wynton Marsalis when you were eleven.

RM: Yes, Wynton was a wonderful teacher and boy did he kick my butt! I still remember how serious he was with me. His mom used to yell at him from the kitchen: "Wynton, don't be so hard on that boy, he's only 11!" Well, now I'm glad that he was hard on me. He held the Arban book up to me and said: "this is like your bible", then he put on a record of Maurice André and said: "this is the best trumpeter in the world!" Most importantly, he taught me how to practice! I love sharing those experiences with students because it's really not in the genes! Anyone can become a really great trumpet player if he or she practices correctly.

PB: You are a graduate of the Curtis Institute. Who did you study and work with?

RM: I had the good fortune to study with Frank Kaderabek. We all know him from all the amazing work that he did with Dallas Symphony, Chicago Symphony and Philadelphia Orchestra. What a lot of people don't realize is how his style of teaching and love of trumpet playing inspired a whole generation of trumpet players, and he is one of nicest and most caring individuals I have ever known. When I was at New England Conservatory I studied with Charles Schleuter. I loved his philosophies about sound production. Sometimes it took years for me to finally get it - I would be in the middle of some huge blow in a Mahler Symphony and one of Charlie's concepts would surface and get me through! I also studied with Roger Voisin and it just breaks my heart that he is no longer with us. My favourite lesson with him was when he taught me how to play

the solos in 'American in Paris'. After a few minutes of me not getting the feel, he slapped his forehead and exclaimed: "this is ridiculous - an old French guy teaching a black kid from New Orleans how to swing!" He did something right that year though because I won my first national orchestra audition under his tutelage at the age of 19. My first teacher after Wynton was George Jansen, who also is no longer with us, but I'm sure that he is in heaven because he went down to New Orleans in the early 70's and taught classical music to black kids. His colleagues thought he had lost his mind, but the result was Wynton Marsalis, Terance Blanchard, Marlon Jordan, myself and scores of other kids who he mentored through all the basics of trumpet playing and music making. Bless his heart for being ahead of his time!



Rodney Mack.

PB: You are presently Principal Trumpet with the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia – that's a most prestigious position to hold.

RM: The Chamber Orchestra is a wonderful group of musicians and I really hope that it continues to grow as a musical organisation. We play a wide range of styles for an audience that loves the intimate setting of Perelman Hall in the Kimmel Center. Our conductor Ignat Solzhenitsyn is a true inspiration to the musicians because of his probing intellect and passionate music making and the board and administration is working hard to help the group continue to develop and grow.

PB: I know that you have won many prestigious positions in your career to date. Which ones give you the most satisfaction?

RM: I have been very lucky in my career in that I have been in several situations where I could continue to concertise as a soloist, play principal trumpet with an orchestra and teach. When I was Principal Trumpet with the Barcelona Symphony, I also taught at ESMUC (one of Spain's leading conservatories). I feel most satisfied when I can perform and hopefully bring a bit of happiness to someone's day, and when I can help students realise their dream of becoming a musician. As Principal Trumpet of Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia and Principal Trumpet of Lancaster Symphony Orchestra, I'm allowed the flexibility to carry out my duties with those groups, but they also have musical leadership, like visionary conductor Stephen Gunzenhauser who gives musicians opportunities to explore their solo or ensemble desires. Conductors like

Gunzenhauser have started to become interested in featuring the Rodney Mack Philadelphia Big Brass with their orchestras and we are thrilled about the prospect of performing with some of the wonderful world class ensembles that have approached us recently.

PB: Please tell Brass Herald readers about Rodney Mack Philadelphia Big Brass, which you founded.

RM: Well, this group is really a dream come true for a lot of people. While I was playing Principal Trumpet for Barcelona Symphony I was once attacked by a group of undercover policemen while I was getting into my car in a parking garage.

It made international news - CNN, New York Times and a lot of papers in Europe and other parts of the world. It turns out it was a case of mistaken identity on their part. Their Police Chief went before the Spanish Parliament and issued an official apology for their mistake. The scariest part of the attack was the fact that I thought as they were beating me: "I'm going to die here in this dark lonely garage", but I also thought that I wouldn't see my loved ones again, or play trumpet again. I had to do a couple of years of physical therapy to recover physically and a lot of soul searching about how to live in a world where violence could suddenly erupt because of someone's prejudice or hate. The assumption that those young undercover cops made that a black guy getting into a Mercedes equals "crime in progress" made me want to do something to help change that sort of prejudiced thinking. So, when I returned to the States

I started calling my friends together to perform and they just happen to be amazing virtuoso players - men and women from a diverse array of backgrounds and cultures. Our press shot looks like the United Nations! And the group sounds absolutely amazing! We want to show the world that what really matters is what you



Rodney Mack Philadelphia Big Brass.

do, how you treat people, how you contribute to society, not what you look like. It's all been very exciting and we were scooped up by a wonderful management agency, Classactsontour. We are going to record our first CD this season and we are looking forward to a lot of stimulating engagements both regionally and internationally.

PB: *Brass Intensive takes place at Outer Banks, North Carolina from the 11th to 14th September and I believe you will be joined by fellow virtuosos Jens Lindemann and José Sibaja. Wow, that makes for a terrific trio of trumpet players and teachers and a great opportunity for those attending.*

RM: I am so lucky to have great friends who I love to hang out with and who also happen to be virtuoso players. Jens, José and I want to share some of the secrets to becoming a better player. The reason that I chose Jens and José is that we are all fascinated with the discovery of new ways to improve one's playing. This Trumpet Intensive - or as Jens likes to call it, "Trumpet Fantasy Camp" - is going to be a wonderful opportunity for a group of trumpeters to come together to probe the possibilities of this wonderful instrument. The three of us adamantly believe that the trumpet is the most expressive instrument available to mankind and we want to help spread the word so that orchestras around the world can start giving us brass players a bit more respect! Right now we are kind of thought of as the ruffians and brutes who make an awful lot of noise, but the truth is that we brass players have a sensitive side too! There are still slots available for interested participants and we encourage anyone who is interested to apply. It's going to be a great time for any level of player, plus we are going to feed everyone gourmet food, sip

wine (and other such beverages) and take in the beauty of the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

PB: *You are a renowned teacher - what are your current teaching posts?*

RM: I am currently trumpet professor at the Pennsylvania Academy of Music. The founders of the school are truly helping to enrich the culture of Lancaster, PA, the region where the school is located. They have been big supporters of The Rodney Mack Philadelphia Big Brass in that they are using the group to perform residencies and concerts for the children and parents in the region. I also teach trumpet at the Interlochen Arts Camp during the summer and I'm frequently called to present master classes at colleges and conservatories like Juilliard School and North Carolina School for the Arts. I did a



Rodney Mack relaxed and ready.

lot of master classes while living in Europe and I hope to do more there and in other countries like China, Japan and Brazil. It's always fun to perform and teach at the same time because it helps people to see that you can actually do the things that you are talking about! I really just moved back to the States a

few years ago and there have been a number of colleges and conservatories that have expressed an interest in me joining their faculty. I hope that I will soon find one that will be the right fit for what I do as a performer.

PB: *Your solo performances have taken you all around the world, including England. What is your future schedule?*

RM: I have travelled to a lot of different and interesting places as a soloist, orchestra musician and clinician. I'm in the process of booking tours to South America, China and Europe. One programme that we do highlights the music and times of the first American to tour to Europe. His name was Francis Johnson and he travelled to England where he performed for Queen Victoria. We are hoping to commemorate that trip with a tour of The Rodney Mack Philadelphia Big Brass to England. It's a really fun programme that hits on a lot of different styles from Renaissance to Jazz. We are also really excited to record our first two CDs to be released summer 2009. I plan on travelling as a soloist to Europe to promote a couple of CDs of new music by composers Lauren Bernofsky, Robert Bradshaw and James Stephenson that I will record in the Spring of 2009. I have a lot of friends in England and I look forward to reconnecting with them and making new friends as I travel! One of my colleagues, Mike Davidson always asks if I am still out "saving the world and playing high notes"! I know he's just joking around, but deep down I truly believe that the international language of music is a thread that binds all human beings together and it is an honour and joy to be a part of something that I think does help bring us together as humans beings sharing this world together and if playing a beautiful phrase or high note helps save the world, then I'm all for it!