

Chris Martin in conversation with Vicky Greenbaum



Chris Martin, appointed principal trumpet of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 2005, kindly consented to chat with me in January 2007 about trumpet playing and his musical life. I've admired his playing on discs made when he was principal with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, but what really piqued my interest were the comments that Adolph Herseth, his predecessor as principal in Chicago, made about him. Mr. Herseth told me, over a delicious cold sushi dinner on a warm California evening during Summer Brass Institute and Festival in July 2006, that Chris Martin has a wonderful spirit and an ego-free approach to learning and to making music. Also, Mr. Herseth thinks he's a perfect fit for the principal's chair in Chicago and that's a very difficult chair to fill. So Chris and I began our conversation with that question.

VG: Chris, I wanted to interview you because I'm interested in your trumpet sound and I'm fascinated by what it takes to be principal trumpet of the CSO.

CM: Yeah (laughs), so am I.

VG: How long have you been sitting in that chair now?

CM: I've been in this chair now for about a year and a half, total.

VG: What do you think you've learned in that time? What's changed the most, for you?

CM: For me, one of the first things that changed was my approach to preparation. My practice regimen had to evolve - I've always been a hard, steady practicer since I was a kid. My dad was a band director, a horn player. He made sure that I was studious. I was blessed with a good sound, early on. But when I came here, I realized that I had to step it up. One of the main changes I made was in building stamina, in building endurance. Besides that, the most basic change has been in my sound. I was just playing a quintet recital with friends from the Atlanta Symphony and the first thing they noticed was that my sound had changed, become more dominant, a bit bigger, the core of the sound had become a lot more intense, projecting. The most basic change is in projection and has come

from playing alongside people who have been in Chicago Symphony for a long time, from over 10 years to over 30 years. It's a tradition which started with Bud and is so strong and ingrained in everyone. It's fabulous. I had no choice but to hop on the train and go for the ride.

VG: *Sitting at the head of that huge sound has made a difference for you.*

CM: Oh yes!

VG: *You said earlier that you were "blessed with a fine sound" and that's evident in your Atlanta recordings. To what do you attribute the development of your sound, early on?*

CM: Well, I was very lucky to have great



Chris Martin.

parents, both musicians. My dad was a brass teacher for his whole life. The first memories I have as a kid are of listening to brass playing, to his band, his drum and bugle corps. I spent all summer on the road with his brass band and his groups. Hearing strong sound, of quality, projecting from a group of 60, 70, or 80 players, those are the first memories I had as a child. When I became serious as a brass player in high school, I studied with Atlanta area teachers, especially Larry Black of the Atlanta Symphony. He was a fine teacher who set me on the road. He made me mix tapes of the best brass moments from major orchestras, primarily of Herseth in the Chicago Symphony. And my dad played me Chicago recordings. That was how I spent my childhood - that and playing baseball (laughs). I was pretty much programmed from the womb to hear great brass sound.

VG: *Brass playing seems unique in that you have to get your ear programmed.*

CM: It is - there's always an element of mystery - we're not always sure how embouchure balances with airspeed and tongue and mouth placement. You look at great players and there's slight similarity in their embouchure, but there's also much

variation. There's such a wide variation in the way the individual player functions. This sets brass apart from some other instruments - for instance, violinists, where you can look at their hands, their position and can make specific changes that have specific results. It's not the same for brass. There are so many intangibles in what we do.

VG: *That's true, makes it more difficult - or easier - depending on the individual.*

CM: Yes, I was reading an article by a student of one of my Chicago Symphony colleagues, Jay Friedman - a PGA golf pro who says that golf and brass playing have in common that they are both very difficult and yet simple at the same time; we often bring the difficulties to it from within ourselves!

VG: *What brought you to the trumpet?*

CM: There was no question that I was going to play a brass instrument. My dad was a horn player, so I started on horn. There were two old Holtons lying around the house, a single and a double and so I played the single for a week. I didn't

like it, so after a week my dad told me to try the double for a week, see if I liked it any better, but I hated it even more, so I knew I was going to be a high brass player. For me the trumpet sound, the soprano bugle sound, had always held a fascination. The projection, the power, the clarity of it, had intrinsic appeal. That's what won out. My dad was extremely disappointed at first that I wasn't going to be a horn player. But he's ok with it now.

VG: *I can imagine that he'd be ok with it now, seeing where you're sitting!*

CM: (Laughs) I remember getting a lecture when I first switched to trumpet - I was very nervous about telling him, it's such a personal thing, afraid he'd be hurt. He sat me down - he said: "you know son, good trumpet players are a dime a dozen, but good horn players are hard to find."

VG: *That's funny - I think there are so many people who play trumpet and so few who actually sound good!*

CM: I agree with you there. I remember telling my dad: "there aren't so many great trumpet players out there."

VG: *What turned you off from the horn? Was it sound issues? Lip issues? Or what?*

CM: It was the sound issue. I didn't like

my horn sound, couldn't get that clarion sound I wanted. When I picked up the trumpet, I couldn't get a great sound immediately, but I could feel that it was possible, that clarion quality. I was a quiet kid, at nine years old when I started and I was looking for something to balance that, a real vocal quality to the instrument that I was choosing.

VG: *What were your first orchestral experiences like?*

CM: The very first was with a local orchestra, Cobb County Youth Symphony - they took the best kids, by audition, from the schools around the county, near Atlanta. I remember the first piece we played was Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* - seems like that's on every youth orchestra concert, anywhere! Then after that I got into the Atlanta Symphony youth orchestra, one of the finest in the country, a really phenomenal group of young musicians. We were coached by Atlanta Symphony musicians, including my teacher, Larry Black. I got most of my orchestral experience there, actually, more than in college, because in music school I didn't always get to play every piece on every concert.

VG: *Where were you in school? Was that Northwestern?*

CM: That was at Eastman School of Music, with Barbara and Charlie (Barbara Butler and Charles Geyer) before they moved to Northwestern. We all got a fantastic education in orchestral repertoire, because they familiarized us with the standard, great pieces and the brass parts in each.

VG: *Where was your first professional experience?*

CM: I was associate principal with Philadelphia Orchestra and that was a great fit for me. I learned a lot.

VG: *What did you learn first - what was the first big change that struck you?*

CM: The biggest adjustment was to start playing four concerts a week, with two to four rehearsals. I had to get the big, orchestral sound, daily. I learned about the endurance needed for the professional schedule. I had to scale back my practice time, first of all. I'd been practicing 4-6 hours in music school; I couldn't continue that and also play full-bore at concerts and rehearsals. I scaled back to very short practice-time, comparatively speaking - learned to streamline my warm-ups. In college, I thought I absolutely had to warm up for 30 minutes and that went out the window when I joined the Philadelphia Orchestra - warm-ups became five minutes, because I had to get through all those rehearsals and concerts.

VG: *When you went to Atlanta as principal, what changed for you as a player? How did you grow?*

CM: The first change was in strength and endurance - another step up from my job in Philadelphia. I had to lead the entire brass section, as principal and in five years there, I learned how to project without forcing. That was the biggest lesson for me. That section has a huge sound, they're great players and I realized right away that I had to learn efficiency.

VG: *Listeners note how your sound sits right on top, pleasingly, in the ASO recording of Ralph Vaughan Williams' Sea Symphony - that's what you mean by projection?*

CM: Yes, if I tried to lead with a big forced sound, I could burn out my chops and that would be the end of the road for me. I had to develop that projection.



Chris Martin with Adolph 'Bud' Herseth.

VG: *What other recordings are on disc with you and the Atlanta Symphony?*

CM: My very first one was Mahler 1 - that was a great opportunity for me, to have a featured solo when I was just starting out. Also, I loved making the *Scheherazade* recording with Robert Spano conducting and there was a Beethoven 9 with Donald Runnicles.

VG: *Do you have any recordings with CSO in the pipeline?*

CM: Yes, the first one in five years is due out in October 2007 - it's Mahler 3.

VG: *You're on posthorn? That's something to look forward to....*

CM: Yes! That was fun. We made that recording with Bernard Haitink and it was a great experience.

VG: *Speaking of conductors - do you have any thoughts on relationships with conductors?*

CM: I have to start by saying that I've never had a problem with a conductor.

VG: *Not everyone can say that. How do you achieve this?*

CM: Honesty is most important, I think. The conductor needs to see that you're having musical ideas, that you make a strong statement when you play and that you have your own feelings about the music. Then the conductor can state their opinion. Perhaps they like your musical statement. Or if they don't, they can ask for changes, make suggestions. And I'm open to any musical idea or suggestion from the conductor and I let them know that. Barenboim, for instance, has a reputation for being very tough. Everyone told me about that as I was starting in Chicago. And I found that he was tough, but very professional, very open. He would tell me exactly what he liked, or he would ask for a change. I like that kind of honesty in a conductor.

VG: *And in CSO, you've seen many conductors, already, after a year and a half.*

CM: That's a great part of our experience in Chicago - we work with so many excellent, different conductors, sometimes every week! Michael Tilson Thomas came our way with Mahler 2, some time ago. He was phenomenal - that Mahler was a transcendent experience and of course we can always count on doing a lot of Mahler in Chicago.

VG: *You started out with two Mahler symphonies, back to back, in your first week at CSO?*

CM: Right. At Ravinia, back-to-back Mahler 1 and 2. That started me off on my learning curve, to bring my sound into step with the huge tradition at CSO. I had to improve my endurance even more. I had to practice more on rotary trumpet. I

had to control extremely soft dynamics - my CSO colleagues are phenomenal at achieving a pervasive sound at pianissimo. I visualize an expansive sound.

VG: *It's intriguing, isn't it, how there is a mystic or spiritual aspect to getting sound on a brass instrument - as you mentioned earlier.*

CM: Yes, you can't really specify how to morph your sound. That's the magic of playing within this great tradition of Chicago symphonic brass sound: it's changing my playing and I can't entirely control how!

VG: *How important is persistence to a trumpeter? And what's the best way to persist intelligently?*

CM: What an excellent question. Persistence is everything. Physical development comes later, for brass players, so you have to let yourself develop slowly. To attain virtuosity takes time,

patience. The persistence needed is almost superhuman. And you need to persist intelligently, to understand that you're human and you can only progress so quickly, not pushing to the point of hurting yourself. You have to be able to enjoy the journey.

VG: *Some of our readers will be interested, also, in the more tangible side - in your equipment. Anything you care to mention about your horns?*

CM: My horn collection has nearly tripled since I joined the CSO.

VG: *Really! How many have you now?*

CM: 35. And I have a feeling that number will grow.

VG: *Which horns do you play most?*

CM: My go-to horn is the Yamaha Chicago Model C, on which I recently played Mahler 5, for instance. But I keep Herse's old Bach Mt. Vernon 229 near me in the practice room - I can see it right now as I'm talking to you. He gave that horn to me after he played on it with CSO for about 50 years. It's my point of reference. If I have a question about how something should sound, a passage in a symphony, or anything - I go to that horn. What better sound check could you wish for?

VG: *Do you play it often in the orchestra?*

CM: No, I don't want to wear it out! I save it for special occasions.

VG: *How about piccs?*

CM: I favour the Schilke A/Bb for orchestra work, Brandenburgs and such. I have a Yamaha F/G also and a Scherzer Rotary picc for solos that aren't with orchestra - it takes too much to cut through the texture, with that horn.

VG: *What rotaries do you favour?*

CM: The Schagerl Rotary C that they made for me - it's a Horsdorf H. Recently Barenboim talked me into using that horn for Mahler 5, for his last performance with us. I was reluctant. He finally got me to do it though and the sound was great. The colour range works well for angst-filled, driven passages and for lyric ones also. We might actually do that again, if the section agrees - it's not what we're used to in the American way of playing Mahler. And I also use the Monke Herse model Bb and C horns often, for Bruckner and so forth.

VG: *You just alluded to talking with the section about which horns to use - can you talk a little bit about what's vital to the leadership role, for principal trumpet?*

CM: I think that in the United States the job of principal trumpet consists of about 50% sound - leading the section sound and so forth - and 50% relational. The relationships you form in the section are key. I learned that in Atlanta first of all. Trumpet players have the challenge of blending - more so than trombones, for instance - and the principal plays a role

there. If people don't communicate and get along well together, they might not sound well together. I took to heart the idea that rapport in the section really affects the sound. It's important to learn how each person functions as a player and what each person needs. In CSO, the brass section has a wonderful, open, honest and free habit of communication. That's the norm and it fosters respect, and a good sound. My first priority, in such a great section, is to lead musically while being open to my colleagues' thinking.

VG: *What would be the most important thought to bring away from your experience so far?*

CM: The main thing that makes the CSO great is that the love of music dominates what we do. It's my first reason to be a musician and it's the most important, I think. At any level - from that first band experience and those young orchestras I was in to the CSO right now - the vital element is the love of music.

VG: *Thank you so much Chris for this excellent interview.*

Chris Martin has kindly consented to be the featured guest artist at The Art of Sound: Summer Brass Institute and Festival in July 2008; in July 2007, the featured guest will be Jens Lindemann.

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