

Jan/Feb 2015 Fanfare Magazine

Feature Article by [Henry Fogel](#)

Interview with Eric Berlin



Fantastique - Premieres for Trumpet and Wind Ensemble: Evan Hause, Jeffrey Holmes, Stephen Paulus and James Stephenson

Audio CD

MSR Classics

You have managed to combine a career as principal trumpet of an important American orchestra, the Albany Symphony Orchestra in New York, with solo and teaching careers. How hard is it to keep those elements in balance? Do they compete for your time and/or attention?

Staying in motion is key because when I do stop, all the spinning plates fall to the floor! The immediate answer is that my life is certainly not in balance in the traditional sense, which makes more room for so many different aspects to my career. I love everything that I do, so the ultimate arbiter of that balance is time and energy. I keep going until I either run out of time or have no choice but to fall asleep.

Truthfully, I never imagined myself as a university professor. My sights were set on taking one of my teachers' jobs as principal of Boston or Philadelphia. Out of school in 1991, I spent most of that decade creating my own work in Boston hustling wedding gigs, promoting my brass quintet, and teaching young students. Taking my first professional orchestra audition for the ASO job in 1998 really marked the beginning of my real professional career.

In the middle of a serious orchestral audition run in 2000–2001, a colleague in the ASO encouraged me to audition for the UMass job. I loved the private teaching I was doing and this became a perfect fit. Teaching young professionals and those who will teach the next generation is a huge bonus for me. Aside from that, the university gives security that allows me to explore artistically without worrying about the bottom line. Not being in an orchestra with a 52-week season gives me the flexibility to structure a varied life of orchestral performance, teaching and solo and chamber performance, which seems to be the right fit for me.

The Albany Symphony is known for its focus on American music, both contemporary and mid-20th-century composers. Has that background influenced or stimulated your own interest in contemporary and American music, because that has been a major focus of your career?

That is a very good question. The ASO's mission certainly resonates with me and I have embraced it as my own. I will say that at least the seeds were there before I joined that orchestra. I grew up in a small town in Lancaster County, PA where I had a heavy dose of Americana in the band tradition, and also being a patriotic soul growing up in an area important in the revolutionary war during our Bicentennial. With John Williams's movie scores filling my brain in the early 1980s, I was subconsciously learning American classical music without knowing it! My love of Copland began the first time I heard *Fanfare for the Common Man* and *Appalachian Spring*, but Copland, Gershwin, Williams, and Bernstein were all I knew until college. There, one of the most gifted educators I have ever known, John Heiss at NEC, turned me on to Charles Ives and really opened my ears to music of the 20th century.

During my first several years in Albany, we were totally immersed in mid-century American music, recording the music of Roy Harris, William Schuman, Morton Gould, Virgil Thompson, and others. It was in this repertoire that I began to come into my own as an orchestral principal and found my voice. I connect to this music in a truly visceral way. There is a unique confidence in this music, underpinned by a certain self-consciousness, which is still trying to find its place in the world. I can relate to that!

Our recordings of Gould especially allow me to embrace the commercial side of my soul as well. I am particularly proud of our Gould disc that includes his *American Symphonette* No. 2 with the famous Pavanne. This immersion gave focus to a passion that evolved into the primary focus of my performance career. I give David Alan Miller kudos for making some great choices in building an orchestra, especially a brass section, that could not only withstand the demands of his programming, but revel in it! We have a spectacular orchestra with musicians who could easily have landed in any of the top-tier orchestras. The unique mission of the ASO to nurture young composers and preserve American music in recordings is the number one reason that many of us are still there. The Grammy Award for our Corigliano disc is a source of great pride for the orchestra and for the community that we serve. That audience has come to expect a commission or at least a premiere on every program. The Grammy gives validation to them and to us for having faith in that vision. I am excited by the many discs we have in the pipeline with music from some of our American composer aristocracy: Michael Daugherty, John Harbison, Aaron Kernis, Christopher Rouse, and especially George Tsontakis. I also have to thank David for giving this energetic young player a wider berth than many conductors may have at the time. We now have an enviable relationship of great personal and professional respect and trust. I owe much to his faith and investment in me, including two concertos commissioned for me, Evan Hause's being the first and then George Tsontakis's *True Colors*, which we premiered in 2012.

Parallel to my work in Albany is another incredibly vibrant new music orchestra in Boston. The Boston Modern Orchestra Project has also been a significant influence on my artistic development. Gil Rose gathers a like-minded group of musicians to continuously do the impossible. It was with Gil that I first

experienced *Nixon in China* and where I am exposed to some really cutting-edge repertoire. We did a Robert Erickson disc a few years ago which really put me through my paces on *Night Music*, and we have recorded an incredible range of work from George Antheil and Lukas Foss to Milton Babbitt, from Jacob Druckman through countless members of our new generation such as Tony DeRitis, Derek Bermel, and Steven Mackey. The quantity and frequency of releases on BMOPSound are simply prodigious.

Between these two remarkable orchestras, a large portion of the music of our time is being preserved for the future. I can think of no better legacy to leave behind.

One thing I note in your playing is the balance between the virtuosic and the elegant. You clearly are capable of whatever technical demands the music makes, and if the music requires technical brilliance you certainly deliver it. It seems a bit more rare to me to find a trumpeter who can do that but who also can play with a real cantabile line, a smooth and even legato. You do bring both elements in equal measure to your playing. Is that a conscious effort on your part?

Thank you so much for this. This is our eternal struggle; to balance our toolbox and palette of color. Each of us individually brings certain strengths to our game so to speak. Through late high school, my career goal was to be the next Maynard Ferguson/Doc Severinsen/Conrad Gozzo/Harry James/Chuck Mangione, etc. With that background I was pretty fearless, but also rather unrefined in the classical realm. My primary mentor, Charles Schlueter (who is also featured on this disc), shaped the way I think about music in a conceptual way and brought added dimensions to what I thought was possible. In addition to his obvious strength in powerful orchestral passages, Charlie has the ability to transcend the instrument and touch your soul with the softest and most intimate moments as well. Vince Penzerella made my technique much more efficient and Tom Rolfs' relentless insistence on "containment" helped me even out the extremes. It is these three voices in my head that help me stay balanced.

As for cantabile, I will admit to a passion for the voice. There is no greater teacher for any of us, on any instrument, than those who bare their souls without the foil of a mechanical device between them and the audience. One of the

greatest moments of my life was when Luciano Pavarotti performed with us in Albany. He was quite kind to me and I got to duet with him in *Granada*. What a thrill! For almost the entire past year, my car has been tuned to Siriusly Sinatra exclusively. This storytelling approach is a powerful model that is often missing from today's popular music. Frank's timing, on either side of the pulse, but always in time, is something that I refer to in my teaching as perfect rubato.

Your disc on the MSR label, Fantastique, presented two composers familiar to me and to many music lovers—Stephen Paulus and James Stephenson—along with two less well-known names: Jeffrey Holmes and Evan Hause. How did you go about choosing the composers and pieces for the disc?

The short answer is that I love each of these works and the voices of these composers are worthy of exposure. One of the things I love about this project is the multi-generational representation with Charlie Schlueter, three of his students, and my students all on the same disc.

I can trace the genesis of this project all the way back to 2000. David Alan Miller asked me if I would be willing to play the Haydn Concerto on a September 2001 subscription concert. I was delighted to be asked, but instead asked if we could do something “more interesting.” Programming the Haydn Concerto is a great PR move and sells tickets, but he was open to other options. I was then tasked with looking for “more interesting” works with a Classical-sized orchestra. Quickly exhausting the very few options, I was bold enough to ask if we could commission a new one. God bless him for not smacking me in the head! At that time we had some great young composers writing for our “Dogs of Desire” new music ensemble, who he suggested that I check out. The one that stood out above the rest was Evan Hause.

Evan's mini-operetta *US Lowball*, about an eBay deal on a minivan gone wrong, was nothing short of brilliant, incredibly witty and showing a real gift for writing idiomatically for each instrument. (Much of what is heard today are notated MIDI creations, in which the instruments and musicians behind them are often an afterthought.) David agreed, and Evan wrote an incredibly inventive and very challenging trumpet concerto, which we premiered only days after the 9/11

attack. Knowing that a piano reduction would not only allow me more venues to perform it, but help it get published, I asked him to create one. We did a couple more performances with piano and then with the Brooklyn Symphony. What seemed to be a more accessible performing option was with collegiate bands. I commissioned him to write a wind ensemble orchestration that we premiered at UMass in 2004 and then performed at the 2004 International Trumpet Guild Conference. We had to scrap the recording in 2004 and it has been scratching at my brain ever since!

That performance at the 2004 ITG was an important moment for me as an introduction to the trumpet world at large. It was there that many of my life-long heroes heard me perform for the first time; in particular, Fred Mills of the Canadian Brass and Doc Severinsen were extremely kind.

At the ITG board meeting at that 2005 Conference, I was engaged to host the 2007 ITG Conference at UMass. My first phone call was to my friend Jeff Work (principal trumpet of Oregon Symphony) asking him to play our college friend Jim Stephenson's Concerto on the opening concert. I was at the premiere of this concerto and it could not have been a bigger success. There was no doubt that I wanted this on the opening concert. Jim was a year ahead of me at NEC and a ridiculous trumpeter I looked up to. Blazing technique and a real ease on the instrument were what I remember most.

In the early planning, I was hoping to bring the Albany Symphony in for that opening concert. It was David Alan Miller again who introduced me to Stephen Paulus's Concerto for Two Trumpets, which was written for Doc and the Minnesota Orchestra's principal trumpeter Manny Laureano. David suggested bringing Doc to play the Paulus for a subscription concert with me and then tag onto the ITG conference concert. As Doc and I were working on a new C trumpet design, the plan started to take shape for him to join me. Stephen's Concerto began to totally enthrall me. The writing is so beautifully vocal in a way that really speaks to me. It has become one of my favorite works.

When it became clear that my budget could not handle bringing the ASO to perform, the US Coast Guard Band came immediately to mind. A sensational

premier band stationed in nearby Connecticut, with many players are friends and colleagues in regional orchestras. It was the perfect solution!

With a band instead of an orchestra, we had work to do. I asked Jim to write not only a wind ensemble orchestration of his concerto, but also to write a new original piece to feature our mutual teacher Charlie Schlueter along with me. The result was *Duo Fantastique* and it is indeed fantastic! Jim has a wonderful sense of color AND a sense of humor. This piece throws a curveball to the higher, faster, louder approach we come to expect in trumpet writing, with the flash of the band introduction leading to a simple slow duet in the solo parts—a hilarious change of pace!

Stephen Paulus, one of classical music's sweetest gentlemen, embraced my challenge of orchestrating his concerto for two trumpets for wind ensemble. Ultimately, Doc was unable to make the schedule work for the conference and I asked my dear friend Richard Kelley to play instead. Rich is an incredibly versatile player and one of the first people I met when I got to Boston. He is capable of beautiful delicacy as well as incredible power, and equally at home as a lead trumpet in a big band as in a classical brass quintet. I'm so glad to have him on this disc!

These two premieres, along with Jim's concerto, comprised the majority of the opening concert for the 2007 Conference at UMass. The US Coast Guard Band was simply spectacular, featuring the band itself and its own soloists.

Now, I had three large works to record with wind ensemble. In the fall of 2009, UMass appointed a phenomenal young conductor named James Patrick Miller. I have been known to be rather persuasive and was able to coerce him into embracing this recording project even before his first rehearsal. In the intervening years, James has transformed our band program with his attention to detail, high artistic standards, and boundless energy. I could not be more proud to share a stage with James and the incredible students of UMass.

To open and close the disc, I leaned on my friend and colleague Jeffrey Holmes. Jeff Holmes is a wonderful multi-talented musician who defies description. He

heads our Jazz and African American Music Studies and is equally at home as bandleader, lead trumpet, pianist, drummer, and composer. He has written for some of the greatest names in jazz, including Max Roach and Yusef Lateef, as well as writing a concerto for our mutual hero Doc Severinsen.

To open the disc, we feature my students performing Jeff's *Herald Emeritus Fanfare* (my notes tell most of the story). This was written in honor of my predecessor, Walter Chesnut, who died just before the 2007 ITG Conference. This was the first thing performed on the opening concert and we dedicated the conference to his memory.

To finish the disc, I asked Jeff to write a new work, to feature Albany Symphony principal trombone and UMass Trombone Professor Greg Spiridopoulos along with me. With *Continuum*, Jeff hit it out of the park, as did our students who were still getting new parts the morning of the performance when this was recorded. Written with the advantage of knowing us well, Jeff gives me some space to play beautiful lines in the style of Doc and Greg is put through paces that very few could handle. In well over a decade sitting side by side with Greg in Albany, I have been astonished by his ability and the apparent ease with which he tackles the most difficult repertoire. We have made a great team!
And there is the disc!

In the 18 years that I managed the Chicago Symphony, I had many conversations with its legendary principal trumpet, Bud Herseth. Bud was very clear that his prime interest was in symphonic music, in playing the great symphonic repertoire. He enjoyed playing solo concertos from time to time, but had no interest in carving out a solo career. I once offered him an evening which would be called "Bud Herseth and Friends," in which he could create a program of chamber and instrumental music around himself, engaging whichever colleagues he wished. After thinking about it for a few days, he thanked me but turned it down, saying that it took all of his effort to keep up his standards as an orchestra player. Reading your biography in the booklet with the recording, I have the feeling that you are very different from Herseth in that way—that you have a huge interest in knowing, and performing, all of the music written for trumpet, whatever the form. Am I correct in that?

First of all, playing in the hot seat of CSO principal trumpeter 52 weeks a year is MORE than a full-time job. Getting the job done to the level that Bud did for that long is a herculean feat. My late high school years were spent glued to my public radio station every night for a different live orchestra concert from Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, New York, and Chicago. As he was for countless of my colleagues, Bud was a hero who set the bar for all of us in those broadcasts and recordings. (I am particularly fond of his playing in the 1960s.)

Although I aspired to and got very close to winning some of these most coveted jobs, I often say that it is a blessing that I did not actually close the deal. My situation allows me to constantly engage musically in different ways so that none of them ever gets boring. My students keep me young, thinking critically about my playing, and they also help me to clarify my decision-making. Of course, there is nothing like sitting in a large orchestra playing Mahler, truly, but I also feel great satisfaction when I sit down and perform with my brass quintet, Majestic Brass. As long as I am making good music on my terms, how can I not be excited about all of it!?

More directly to your question, yes, I am looking for music of quality for my instrument. Many composers feel limited by our technical challenges, resulting in much of our repertoire being rather mediocre. My life would be so much more complete if Samuel Barber had written a trumpet concerto like his violin concerto! Part of my work on the ITG Commissioning Committee is to help create new works for our instrument. We want the primary voices of our time to fill our repertoire. We have a new trumpet and piano sonata in the works from Michael Daugherty, and just had Julian Wachner write a trumpet and organ work. Last year we engaged a Chinese composer to write a trumpet ensemble work. I am also chair of the ITG New Works Committee, which helps to promote existing works with performances at our conferences. There are some really exciting things we are reviewing right now.

In addition to your trumpet teachers, who are the strong musical influences that helped to shape you as a musician? (For example, Herseth used to say that his three strongest influences were Frank Sinatra, Jüssi Björling, and John

McCormack, and I was struck by the fact that you cited Sinatra earlier in this interview).

Yes, I touched on some of this when we discussed cantabile earlier. Singers are key. I grew up with mom's kitchen radio on WARM 103, a soft rock station in the 1970s and 80s. There I heard great singing from my favorite pop voice of all time, Karen Carpenter, along with Barbara Streisand, Barry Manilow, and others. In college I began to get more interested in jazz singers such as Nancy Wilson, Mel Tormé, Ella Fitzgerald, etc. As for classical singers, there is none better than Pavarotti, but Fritz Wunderlich was taken from us far too young; he might have surpassed him. His *Granada* is emblazoned in my soul! A new singer you must listen for is a Canadian soprano named Jessica Muirhead. In January, we recorded a three-CD set of the music of Julian Wachner at Trinity Church Wall Street, and she absolutely blew my mind.

Most of your recordings have featured contemporary music, and clearly that is a passion of yours. But are there “old masters”—composers from the 18th and 19th centuries—whose music particularly appeals to you? And if so, what is it about those particular composers that resonates with you?

It seems clichéd, but Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms come immediately to mind. This past summer, I walked into Bach's church in Leipzig. Merely entering that space was very powerful on a spiritual level, well beyond the church itself. There has never been more perfect music written.

At the Colorado Music Festival a few years ago, we performed all of the Beethoven symphonies in a week. It was incredibly intense but fascinating to get inside each of these works in succession. Each of these symphonies is a unique sonic world, utterly different from those that come before and after, but clearly from the same genius. Could 7 and 8 be more incredibly different?

I simply adore Brahms. There is something about the experience of each of the Brahms symphonies which allows us to traverse the complexity of human emotions and come out the other side feeling nothing but resplendent joy. I find myself totally choked up with emotion at the end of each of the symphonies.

I often say that I will throw two punches in the afterlife. The first goes to Bach's trumpeter for making our lives so difficult and the second goes to Brahms. Why? Because he had the ability to write for the valved trumpet and chose not to! Oh, what I would give for a Brahms concerto!

Poor, misunderstood Bruckner also holds a special place in my heart, for the depth within music that can appear so deceptively simple.

What recording plans are in your future?

The next solo release will be another concerto that David Alan Miller and the ASO were so kind to commission for me. I am very excited! Years ago, we recorded George Tsontakis's *Mirologhia* with percussionist Colin Currie, and I was profoundly moved by it. What touched me most about this work was not only George's gift for vibrant colors and textures, but the compelling narrative which he wove through it. After a brief percussion introduction, the bottom falls out, leaving a gorgeous solo trumpet line spanning two octaves. With that line I was hooked.

George wrote *True Colors* as a very personal multiple entendre, referring to his gift for color, pitch sets of perfect intervals, as well as me finding my "True Colors" as the concerto takes me through discovery of my instrument and how it helped define who I am. We premiered and recorded this work in March of 2012 and it will be released within the next year, I believe.

Also half done is a chamber disc that I began a few years ago. There is a remarkable brass trio by one of my colleagues, Sal Macchia, and some new works by Robert Bradshaw including a tribute to a beloved dog, *Notes for Buddy*. I hope to get a few more works recorded this year to finish that disc. Maybe a short respite for a while after that!

Review by Henry Fogel

FANTASTIQUE: Premieres for Trumpet and Wind Ensemble • Eric Berlin, ¹(dir, ²⁻⁵tpt, ⁵flugelhorn); ²Greg Spiridopoulos (tbn); ³Charles Schlueter (tpt); ⁴Richard Kelley (tpt); ¹UMass Trumpet Ens; ²⁻⁵UMass Wind Ens • MSR 1506 (60:51)

HOLMES ¹*Herald Emeritus Fanfare*. ² *Continuum* for Trumpet, Trombone, and Wind Ensemble. **STEPHENSON** ³*Duo fantastique*. **PAULUS** ⁴*Concerto for Two Trumpets and Band*. **HAUSE** ⁵*Trumpet Concerto*

This is a thoroughly delightful, stimulating, even exciting disc of recorded premieres. All of these composers, each one American, have extensive experience in writing for wind ensemble, and the variety of musical styles, combined with the consistency of sound world among the pieces, makes for an hour of listening that has both variety and unity. Trumpeter Eric Berlin is the featured attraction here, and he plays the trumpet with flair and technical brilliance as well as a seamless legato when that is what the music wants.

The *Herald Emeritus Fanfare* by Jeffrey Holmes has a lovely story behind its origin, nicely told by Berlin in the excellent accompanying booklet. It is a celebratory and grand fanfare, a perfect opening track for the disc.

James Stephenson's *Duo fantastique* was commissioned by the two soloists who play it here. Stephenson has managed throughout his career to write music that has a direct audience appeal without ever pandering. This *Duo* has influences of jazz and big band sounds while keeping the listener (and performers) engaged with a sense of musical development that goes way beyond "easy listening." It is a delightful work.

Stephen Paulus's Double Trumpet Concerto is very colorfully scored for winds and percussion, and has a theatricality about it that reflects the composer's longtime association with the world of opera. Evan Hause's Concerto is of particular interest because the middle slow movement, a dirge, uses the flugelhorn instead of the trumpet. Between the virtuosic flair of the first movement and the wit of the finale, the mellow and somber tone of both the flugelhorn itself and the music Hause has written for it makes for a lovely contrast.

The final work on the disc is *Continuum* by Jeffrey Holmes, and it is a highly imaginative piece based on a work for two violins, but here reimagined for trumpet, trombone, and winds. Influenced by a wide range of sources—Coltrane, mariachi bands, concert bands, Latin ensembles, and more—this extremely expressive work is a very strong and personal statement. Holmes’s skill in weaving all of those influences into a work that hangs together is very impressive.

All of the performances here are extremely engaged and persuasive. Technically the brass and wind playing is as accomplished as one would hope and expect. But more impressive is the energy, imagination and commitment of each of the performances. Nothing here can be accused of high quality “note-reading.” These are all performances that convey conviction and belief in the music, and the rich, clear, and well-balanced recorded sound is yet another asset. For anyone who loves music for brass and/or woodwinds, this disc is enthusiastically recommended.

Henry Fogel

This article originally appeared in Issue 38:3 (Jan/Feb 2015) of *Fanfare* Magazine.