

# The Creative Hornist

by Jeffrey Agrell, Series Editor

## Pip Eastop: Creative Hornist of the Year



**T**he winner of the Corno Pazzo Award (now an award and not a contest) for the Most Creative Hornist of the Year goes to English hornist Pip Eastop. Pip (short for Phillip) is, on first glance, just your garden variety world class virtuoso: principal horn of the London Sinfonietta 1977–1986, a specialist for both natural horn and contemporary music, professor of horn at both the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of music, freelancer in film music (*Shrek*, James Bond films, *Toy Story*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Gladiator*, and many more), opera, symphonic music - there seems to be no avenue of music that he hasn't done. Did I mention he also plays on the London Horn Sound CD, for my money among the most exciting horn recordings, ever?

Yawn. A sterling record like that won't even make the finals of the Corno Pazzo award. You have to have something cooking that transcends the ordinary, big time. Let's look further.

- Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music (FRAM). Big deal. There are currently 161 of those, folks like Malcolm Arnold, José Carreras, James Galway, Wynton Marsalis. I need more, something really unique and creative.

- Teacher of Alexander Technique. A bit out of the ordinary, but not nearly enough.

- Awarded a research development grant in 1997 from the Arts Council of Great Britain to explore, with composer

Edward Williams, the possibilities of controlling computer-driven transformation of sound during live, partially improvised performance. Hmm. Step in the right direction.

- Father of four kids. Now he is beginning to get my attention. Four kids and a wife and doing all this stuff mean he must be very creative just to juggle the time to do it all. But I need more.

## Inventions

Aha: here's something: in his *spare* time, he invents things. This guy thinks. Imagines. Dreams. And realizes his dreams (creativity is not just dreaming about something – it is making dreams happen in some concrete form). To wit:



- The PipStick.** "An attachment which fits securely on the underside of the horn and provides a support so that the entire weight of the instrument is taken by the right leg. The foot of the PipStick, where all the weight of the instrument is transmitted to the player's leg, stands on the upper side of the right thigh about halfway between knee and hip. The height of it is adjustable and, to a certain extent, so is the angle at which it projects from the horn." He developed it in 1981 during his Alexander Technique training as way to make the horn in effect weightless in the playing position – taking a cue from the many instruments there are that don't have to be lifted to be played. He discovered that he could practice much longer and without aches, pains, and fatigue. The only disadvantage he's found is that he can't use it when he must stand to play.



After many enquires, he has made arrangements with instrument technician Gale Lawson to make PipSticks commercially. (price: £250). Note that these are custom built for each horn and this work can only be done at Gale's workshop in North London.



•**The bent mouthpiece.** By bending the shank of his mouthpiece 8° he found he could rotate it through a circle of infinitely variable positions to accommodate various postures, e.g. when he stands, he turns the mouthpiece a little down and to the left, which helps equalize the position of the arms and takes most of the twist out of the shoulders. When sitting, he can lower the instrument without dropping his head forward, so that he can read what's on the music stand and keep a straight back. Pip used a padded vice and a large rubber mallet, but doesn't do mouthpiece bending for anyone else, and recommends that you only try it on a spare to start with.

•**The EaseStop.** "Handstopping can be a nightmare for any player but it is even worse if you have small hands and a large bell." To eliminate this particular nightmare, Pip came up with a "specially shaped insert which sits between the thumb and index finger of the right hand," made of PVC-based modeling material that can be molded into shape by hand then hardened in an oven at 265°F. The EaseStop makes handstopping louder and much better in-tune and, as a bonus, gives the unstopped extreme high register better definition, clarity, and reliability. Instructions on how to make one are given on his web site (as well as descriptions and photos on all the inventions).

These clever inventions would merit a Creative Hornist of the Year Award by themselves. But they are not what really caught my attention. It was this:

### Back to Back to Back

A CD. Three horns, free improvising. I heard. I listened again. I whooped with delight. I still don't believe my ears. A Corno Pazzo winner, in spades!

Pip Eastop got together with Jonathan Williams and Richard Bissill in a resonant church with three chairs and a microphone. No rehearsal. They played. That's all - just played. No music stands, no (written) music, no pre-conceptions.

They made it up as they went along. Play. Listen. Respond. Magic!

I have never heard the like. There are 27 tracks, with titles (added after the fact) like "Ejaculations," "Lacrimosa," "Chatterbox," "Pizzacato," "Elephant Bees Coming In to Land," "God Help the Queen." They explore every parameter of horn playing and music from the loudest to the softest, highest to the lowest, and do so with phenomenal ability, agility, facility, imaginability, and not a little telepathy.

I was speechless with delight and wonder. The last time I was this wowed by a horn recording was the time I received a cassette in the mail in 1988 marked only with the cryptic epigraph "Arkady Shilkloper," whatever that meant.

I found Pip's web site ([www.eastop.net](http://www.eastop.net)) and read about him and his inventions. Then I asked him for an interview to learn more.

### Some Pip History

Pip's first instrument was the recorder. His father, an oboist in the Band of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, asked him what instrument he would like to learn next. Pip – for no reason that he can think of – said "French horn," and his dad brought home a compensating Kalison and a copy of Farkas's book. Pip's dad was his first – and still best – teacher. "He didn't know anything about the horn... but he was very good at being methodical. 'Think of the note before you play it,' he'd say." Good advice that has been one of the cornerstones of Pip's playing and teaching ever since.

Pip went to the Royal Academy of Music when he was 14 as a student of Ifor James. At 19 he won a job as principal horn in Antwerp, Belgium. But he didn't know how to speak Flemish, cook, wash clothes, or manage money. "It was dreadful. I had such a miserable time... I left after a year and came home." But very soon a chance came his way to sub with the London Sinfonietta, and the successful gig turned into a permanent job (the player he replaced was Barry Tuckwell).

The London Sinfonietta specializes in contemporary music. Pip: "The trouble with contemporary music in my view is that every note's written down, every dynamic of every note, every articulation, everything about it. Many modern composers have gone completely over the top in taking over complete control of instrumentalists – making them simply readers by not allowing them any creative input."

But, in fact, it led Pip to make his first improvised recording. "Most [contemporary music] ends up sounding improvised. I was always sure I could make something up that sounded more interesting, that would suit the instrument better."

### Hornwaves

In the early 1980's, Pip heard about the possibility of multitrack recording and, intrigued, he rented a church in north London and recorded what turned out to be "Hornwaves" – "horn quartets for solo horn." He would improvise each track, listen to what he had recorded and record another track on top of it, moving his chair each time to the place where that hornist would be playing if there was



an actual quartet. It was exhausting: "We spent two days doing this and my chops were shot to pieces. It was great fun." He made several hundred cassette copies, sold some, gave the rest away. "Hornwaves" can be heard on his web site ([www.pyp.f2s.com/html/recordng.htm](http://www.pyp.f2s.com/html/recordng.htm)).

### B2B

A few years later, Pip had the urge to do it again, but this time adding another player: Jonathan Williams, "a mind-boggling player." [Williams is principal horn of the Chamber Orchestra of Europe]. They went back to the same church, sat on either side of a stereo mic, and improvised "loads of duets." This cassette album was called "Back to Back." [From the liner notes:] "The pieces of music which emerged during the two days of recording were stimulated each time by simple ideas decided upon just before starting to record. For example, one of us might say, "Why not make this one slow and harmonious?" or "How about building one on aggressive glissandi and rapid staccato tonguing, etc.? Sometimes the resulting piece would be embarrassingly awful and other times we struck lucky, or so we thought. As time went on it became increasingly difficult to judge what was good and what was not. We still don't know but, out of all the takes, roughly half of them survived censorship. The titles were added later to make it sound like we cleverly made up the pieces around them. If anything sounds effective or musically interesting on this recording it is entirely accidental. And what Jonathan and I find so rewarding and exciting about this album is precisely that fact, that all the music was an accident and we take no credit where credit may be due." (A recording of B2B is currently unavailable.)

### B2B2B

In 1990, Pip wanted to try it again as a trio to add more depth. "The obvious choice was Richard Bissill. His playing is well-known for its combination of mercurial musical wit, Chevrolet-like smoothness and power, and extraordinarily agile grace." [Bissell is principal horn of the London Philharmonic, a composer, and did some of the arrangements on "The London Horn Sound" recording]. Back to the same church went the three, no rehearsals. After some experimentation, they ended up sitting so that each bell was pointing half way between the other two bells, the only drawback being that they couldn't see each other.

"We had to [start] by telepathy. We got this heightened sense of aural perception. We were very, very tuned in." After two days and 12 hours of recording, they kept an hour's worth (mostly from the second day) of the pieces they had improvised and then added the titles.

"It was one of the most exciting musical experiences I've ever had. We didn't rehearse. The first time the three of us ever

played together was on the first track of B2B2B. We just sat there and played. Before each attempt at a piece we would discuss how we might begin, which one of us would take the lead and who might be first to follow. We would also usually agree beforehand on some kind of tempo, mood, or style. Sometimes we decided to start recording with no ideas at all to see what would happen but, at the opposite extreme, as in "Fanfare," we spent a few

minutes scribbling a dozen or so notes down. We sometimes made suggestions – 'Let's have this one sort of loud and strident, perhaps a slow section in the middle.' Or I'd say, 'All right, Jonathan, you start this one and we'll just muck in on what you've got going and we'll see what happens.' 'All right, let's have Richard playing some sort of theme and Jonathan and I are decorating it.' Or: 'Let's have one where we just try using sound effects and make a big collage out of it.' Or: 'Let's have one based on a theme. We did one based on 'God Save the Queen' It was the most wonderful liberating things. After we listened back to them, we thought, that's great! How the hell did we do that? It's so easy to make music. You just do it. You don't need composers. You don't need to write it down. [from the liner notes]: "In order to give a unified form and style to what might otherwise have been three disconnected lines of solo improvisation it was important that we listened very carefully to each other whilst playing to catch any material which could be echoed, developed, exaggerated, extended decorated, accompanied or used as accompaniment, or simply left alone. The result is music which seems to have a peculiar coherence of its own."

In spite of the success of the project, they have relived the experiment only once, in 1994 at the Horn Society Workshop in Manchester. B2B2B went live, on stage. Our lads professed to be scared to death that the magic that had happened in the recording studio might not translate to live performance – but in fact it was a great success.

### How Did They Do It?

I wanted to know all about it, how they created such stunning, quasi-telepathic collective improvisation. I knew from reading Jeff Bryant's 1994 interview with Pip [reproduced on Pip's web site] that Pip is an enlightening and entertaining interview subject [Bryant: Who is your favourite conductor? Pip: I'm sorry, I don't understand the question.] and I looked forward finding answers to my questions in the interview.

Q: What kind of preparation did you do individually and as a group for the recording?

A: None.

### Pip Eastop's Improvisation Recordings:

"HornWaves"- Quartets for Solo Horn by Pip Eastop (1984)

"Back To Back" - Two Part Discoveries for Horns (with Jonathan Williams)

"Back To Back To Back" - Improvised Inventions for 3 Horns (with Richard Bissill and Jonathan Williams)



- Q: Do any of you have jazz backgrounds?  
 A: No.  
 Q: Have you tried to market the recording with a record company?  
 A: No.  
 Q: What did reviewers say?  
 A: Nothing. We only had a couple of thousand discs made and we didn't want to waste any.  
 Q: What do you recommend to others to get in on the experience of improvisation?  
 A: Simply do it. Get together with other horn players or any instrument. It's best with other horn players because it's such an easy game, and just do it, you'll be amazed at how easy it is. I've done workshops on improvisation at the Royal College of Music, at the Royal Academy of Music, Trinity, Birmingham, Guildhall. In groups of 2, 5, whatever, it never fails, you always get something good, even with mixed instruments. It is very pure music because you just play, you don't read. Just do it.

Ah, there, finally: the secret! (just what Nike has been telling us all along). Just do it! Go to Pip Eastop's web site ([www.eastop.net](http://www.eastop.net)) and get all the details, with photos.

And that is the amazing Pip Eastop in a nutshell. He is our Creative Hornist of the Year for 2003, not really for what he did this year (this year only because I just found out about him), but for what he has been doing for years and continues to do. To wind up, let's look at some of his current creative doings:

- Teaching. He continues to be a sought-after teacher, both privately and at the RAM and RCM, and gives workshops and classes.

- Learning to play jazz trumpet. He describes his efforts on his web site in "A Jazz Journal" – a fascinating and informative read.

- A recording project with Richard Bissill where they intend to improvise some duets, then transcribe, edit and polish them, and produce them in a book with a CD showing them in both their original and final form.

- Creative geniuses like Pip Eastop will always be up to something interesting. How about this one, taken from his solo improvisation concerts: "A nice trick is to take a bunch of brass instruments and connect them to your horn with lengths of hosepipe. For example, take all the F tuning slides out of a double horn and connect long hosepipes from each to other brass instruments. For example, run one from the first F slide across the stage to a euphonium, send the 2<sup>nd</sup> slide overhead to a hanging trumpet, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the other side of the stage to a trombone. Then you can play the three 'slave' instruments by pressing the valves down and blowing. By playing the Bb side then 1<sup>st</sup> F, 2<sup>nd</sup> F, 3<sup>rd</sup> F – dadadadadadada-dum you can have each note coming out of a different instrument for quite an exciting effect. Quite good fun!"

One hallmark of a creative personality is a sense of humor. Pip Eastop is one of the world's great anagram enthusiasts, and he shares his discoveries on his web site. Many of the best on are

X- or R- rated and can't be reprinted here, but here is a tiny selection of his vast collection:

Claude Debussy: seduce us badly  
 Barry Tuckwell: wreck brutally  
 Igor Stravinsky: Kirov stingrays  
 Ludwig van Beethoven: The ungowned bivalve; huge bow – and in velvet  
 Maurice Ravel: lemur avarice  
 Irritable bowel syndrome: O, my terrible drains below  
 Dennis Brain: Risen in band  
 Michael Thompson: Lame chops? Not him.  
 Richard Bissell: Irish dill crabs  
 Phillip Eastop: Hippo pastille  
 London Philharmonic Orchestra: alcohol-rich horns predominant  
 The Houses of Parliament: Loonies far up the Thames

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