

MEDITATIONS

Photo by Chris Brown Photography

by Terrence London

I first met Ronald Romm in 2006 while I was working for a major classical recording label. The Canadian Brass had just released a new album, and I was asked to be the point person at the corporate office of one of the label's more important accounts. The Brass's mission that day: to perform for the entire staff of this company in an informal lunch/concert gathering. It was a great PR and schmoozing opportunity for the Brass, as well as the record company.

I was early and waited outside the building for the band to show up on what had turned out to be a chilly morning. I tried to keep warm by hopping from one leg to the other as I watched my breath leave my body in small puffs of smoke. Finally a black sedan showed up, the back door opened, and out popped Ronald Romm, with a twinkle in his eye and a happy greeting for me. I extended my hand; Ron grabbed it and pulled me into a bear hug as if we were old pals who hadn't seen each other in years. I immediately liked him.

RONALD ROMM ON TRUMPET



Ronald Romm, pictured with fellow trumpet player Michael Ewald (1948–2008), has made nearly 100 recordings and was recently named one of the top 12 brass players of the 20th century by *Brass Bulletin Magazine*.

The performance went extremely well. Though I had heard the Canadian Brass play many times live and also on record, I was particularly touched by Romm's playing that day: it was almost like speech. Could he actually be playing so well that I understood his meaning beyond merely the tune and rhythm? I think so. Since then I have become more than a fan of this virtuoso trumpet player, I have also gotten to know him personally.

Romm comes from a musical family. His mother was a classically trained clarinetist, who also took up the saxophone in the family dance band, The Romm-Antics, in order to spend more time with her husband, a drummer. Both were enthusiastic lovers of music, and they instilled this love and passion in their son. Romm says listening to music on the radio and to phonograph records became a big part of their daily lives.

When he was around nine years old, Romm was introduced, almost accidentally, to the trumpet. He had come home from school for lunch as usual, but on this day he heard "fantastic sounds coming out of the radio." "Who is that?" he wondered aloud. His mom said, "Why, that's Louis Armstrong, playing trumpet." He says his reply was quick: "That's what I want to do!"

Eager to start, he was given his first trumpet and took his first lessons with his mother—from whom, he likes to say, he learned to play "with a soft clarinet sound." Besides Armstrong, he also got an earful of Harry James, another reigning trumpet king of the day. Along with popular music, he sought out and heard great playing from the best principal trumpeters of America's major orchestras at the time, including Adolph "Bud" Herseth in Chicago, Samuel Kraus in Philadelphia, and William Vacchiano in New York. Vacchiano eventually became Romm's teacher when he attended The Juilliard School years later.

Opera was also a big influence—the singing styles of Maria Callas and her great stage partner Giuseppe Di Stefano, as well as the lyrical technique of Enrico Caruso and Luciano Pavarotti, became part of his music education.

Growing up in Los Angeles, Romm had access to a cross-section of music styles. Along with jazz, big band, opera, and orchestral music, there were klezmer, folk, and chamber music. One of his earliest teachers was Lester Remsen, who played trumpet with the U.S. Marine Band and eventually became principal trumpet of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. It was lucky he met Remsen, as Remsen was a pioneer in the development of brass chamber music. Very little was available at that time. After Remsen became well established at the University of Southern California, he and his colleagues not only arranged music for brass but also recovered neglected scores from decades earlier. He formed a quintet called the Los Angeles Brass Ensemble. When he felt Romm was ready, Remsen invited his young

protégé to sit in and, eventually, join the group. This ensemble, as well as a brass quintet made up of members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, became Romm's training ground.

When he went to New York to study at Juilliard in 1967, the brass quintet was still a largely unheard-of musical combination. Enthusiastic about forming his own group, Romm found other interested players and started the New York Brass Society, a quintet that rehearsed four times a week—usually late into the night, given the members' busy day schedules. When the opportunity came to join the Canadian Brass, he had the

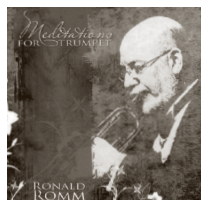
training and expertise not only to fit right in but also to help take the group into a new era of brass playing.

The Canadian Brass sprang from modest, experimental roots in Toronto, from an idea developed by founders Eugene Watts and Chuck Daellenbach in 1970. Along with engaging stage presence, their serious and meticulous attention to detail helped define them as one of the great chamber ensembles of their time. The members' imagination and consummate musicianship eventually elevated the art of the brass quintet to what it is today. The Canadian Brass became one of the first quintets to bring exceptional and virtuosic brass chamber music settings to worldwide audiences, a major change for an entire family of instruments.

Romm has played professionally for more than 50 years, performing around the world—in Japan, China, Australia, and most of Europe, includ-



An Illinois Summer Youth Music student receives instruction from Romm in his studio at U of I.



Meditations for Trumpet, a CD featuring Ronald and Avis Romm and released by Opening Day Records, made its debut at No. 11 on *Billboard Magazine's* Classical Traditional Chart on August 28, 2010.

ing Russia. He has made nearly 100 recordings, which have sold more than 1.5 million copies, and was recently named one of the top 12 brass players of the 20th century by *Brass Bulletin Magazine*.

Romm's latest project, *Meditations for Trumpet* (Opening Day Records), features some of the best-known classical works performed by Romm, accompanied at the piano by his wife, Avis. Avis, whom Ron met while at Juilliard, is a dynamic and perceptive musician who not only performs but also directs a piano studio in Sarasota, Florida. "The music [on the CD] is some of the most beautiful and famous music in Western society," Ron says. "As a trumpeter, I wouldn't get a chance to play some of this extraordinary music. The pieces selected were either keyboard or vocal creations to start." The arrangements, gorgeous and effective, were created by Ron and Avis, as well as their friend Lee Norris.

The Ronald and Avis Romm Trumpet and Piano Duo keep a busy touring schedule, including a Symphony Pops show featuring a Christmas Spectacular that is—by all accounts—spectacular. In addition, their son Aaron, himself a trumpet player, has begun to sneak into the group, expanding it from a duet to a trio. In the works is a recording project featuring the three of them.

Playing trumpet in a chamber music ensemble can be taxing for anyone, so Romm offers some advice and ideas about trumpet performance. He suggests, for instance, that "repetition of the repertoire will make performance easier...so practice performing. Put yourself in performance mode anytime you pick up your instrument." He continues, "Without getting too deeply into pedagogy of brass playing, we can only do one thing at a time, so that thing should be to maximize the ease of playing." He explains that "the mind that is controlling the body will do what it has to do to protect the body from damage, so if we lean backward, for example, while taking a breath or while playing, the mind senses that we are going to succumb to gravity and fall." The mind

does what he calls "an automatic protection setup" to keep us from falling. It puts the body in a position where the muscles are doing isometric exercise rather than balanced breathing. "The thing that is being accomplished is protection from the fall," Romm says. "If we stay balanced while breathing—during both inhalation and exhalation—we can then focus on the music. Sounds complicated, but staying relaxed but focused while playing will help us to accomplish the musical goal without excess fatigue."

Other tips concern warming up ("for me, my warm-up is essential—I use it as a diagnostic tool to highlight where I need to focus extra energy for that day's performance") and switching instruments in mid-concert ("switching from B-flat trumpet to, say, piccolo trumpet is just a tool to make the musical endeavor more interesting; we switch to change the sound. The challenge is not thinking about the change. Too much thinking about the technical will make the transition more difficult. We need to stay inside the music...less thinking and more listening.") He also offers advice about conquering nervousness. "I get really excited on concert days," he says. "The primary thoughts are 'I get to play our show'; 'this is the best thing that can happen'; and 'the audience will enjoy it'—that is this most important thing. So if I enjoy myself and they enjoy the performance, mission accomplished."

Romm says the best compliment he can get from someone is when they tell him "you made it sound so beautiful, so easy, so natural. Boy, am I glad I came to hear you play." Anyone who listens to him play the trumpet will come away saying just that.



Ronald and Avis Romm have performed together since they were students at The Juilliard School.

Ronald Romm is Professor of Trumpet and Brass Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Terrence London reviews music and recordings for *The Review* and is author of articles and commentary on classical, jazz, and other genres of music. *Meditations for Trumpet* (ODR 9381) is available on Opening Day Records (www.openingday.com).