Manon Lafrance in conversation with Philip Biggs

PB: Manon, welcome to The Brass Herald and thank you so much for taking time out to talk to me and Herald readers.

ML: Thank you Philip! It’s a pleasure for me to do this interview for The Brass Herald.

PB: Sitting at the top left hand corner, how did you take up the trumpet initially?

ML: I had a neighbour of my age who was playing in a drum corps and she invited me once to see the band. I remember the impact it had on me - the sound, the shiny instruments! I wanted to take part and play music. I was ten years old when I joined. My horn had only one valve that I would play with my right thumb. At the age of 12 I went to high school; the music teacher gave me a trumpet and I played in the school band.

PB: Your trumpet teacher read like a who’s who of trumpet teaching - Philip Smith, Vincent Cichowicz and Arnold Jacobs. Wow!

ML: I had great mentors. My principal teacher was Jean-Louis Chazel with whom I studied at the Conservatoire de Musique de Montreal from 14 until 21 years old. Mr. Chazel played second trumpet at the Montreal Symphony Orchestra for 41 years from 1959 until 2000. He still teaches and is a very good teacher. Thereafter I had the chance to have private lessons with Phil Smith. What a great sound he has! Then much later I met with Vincent Cichowicz. I learned wind pattern, the violin bow air movement, easy playing and free wind. It improved my playing. For a few years, we were teachers at the Brass session of the Domaine Forget in Quebec, Canada, where we spent a lot of time talking about music, teaching and life in general. He said that Domaine Forget was the unknown paradise for any student. He was too ill at the end of his life to come to the Domaine and I missed him very much. I had the opportunity to have a lesson with Arnold Jacobs shortly before he died; breathing more, air efficiency and “song and wind”. The perfect continuity for my playing. I feel fortunate that I had such fantastic guidance by those four great teachers.

PB: You graduated from the Conservatoire de Musique de Montreal?

ML: I graduated from the Conservatoire in 1986 and was awarded the grand First Prize. A year before, in 1985, I had been awarded the grand First Prize for chamber music.

PB: Talking of your hectic schedule, I believe you are Principal trumpet of the Orchestra.

ML: That’s right. I love to do many different things, learn new repertoire, meet new people and travel!

PB: That must make for an unbelievably hectic but exhilarating professional life!

ML: Absolutely! I appreciate every side of performing - solo, orchestral, chamber music groups. I also participate in recordings and master classes. I learn so much having and conducting many different projects. This brings me a lot of new knowledge and different experiences. I do a lot of reading and listening to music, searching for new music and new recordings. It’s good for me and my students also benefit from it. I listen to many musicians, not only brass players but also singers, string players, piano players; it’s an important part of my learning and I invite my students to do the same.

PB: Then there is your teaching at Conservatoire de musique de Montreal. MI: I have been teaching at the Conservatoire since 1997. I love performing but the teaching part is extremely important to me. I really appreciate helping my students achieve their goals. It’s a great opportunity to be teaching in this great school. So many great musicians that are present on the international scene studied there - Alain Trudel and Yannick Desort Seguin, just to name two.

PB: What do the students do at the CMQM?

ML: The trumpet students have private lessons with me every week and every second week the trumpet class meets with me for a lesson on orchestra repertoire. They also meet once a week with our great and much appreciated pianist Sandra Murray for their trumpet repertoire. Students have the opportunity to play in the orchestra, in the brass choir, which includes orchestral brass reading sessions, in the baroque ensemble, in the contemporary ensemble and they also get to play in chamber music groups. Students and teachers have access to the superb music library of the Conservatoire which has many collections of parts and recordings. At the Conservatoire, there is a schedule of more than 500 concerts every year. Students are busy!

PB: Can you talk about your teaching at the Conservatoire de musique de Montreal?

ML: It’s important for me that students start their day with a good warm-up. I make them play the Cichowicz warm-up in a very musical singing way. At the beginning of your day you should...
be breathing well, blow from wind and singing with the trumpet! We go on with fundamentals: Arban, Clarke, Stamp and others.

Then students play trumpet studies, transposition and technical exercises. We continue with the trumpet repertoire and orchestral excerpts they are working on. There is so much repertoire. I don't have enough time during the lesson to go through everything they have prepared for me!

I like to play with the students during lessons and I always challenge them with studies and repertoire where they have to work hard, but where I know that they will be able to perform with quality playing. I find it an obligation for a teacher not to suggest a piece so difficult that it could bring bad habits to the student, create stress in performing, or where the student could become afraid to play that piece in the future. I make sure that students practice their fundamental techniques every day, that they diversify the practice and play nice melodies! This is a very good routine to learn in school and to continue into the professional life to keep the quality of the playing very high, improve the musicianship and avoid possible injuries.

I myself have had three serious injuries. Not from playing but by accident! I have been hit three times on my lips: the head of a big dog, a ski pole and finally a tuba that hit my trumpet when my mouthpiece was already on my lips ready to play. It took time, patience, playing nice simple melodies, basic exercises and positive thinking to go through this, but my recovery is complete!

PB: What does it mean to you to be a member of the Trumpet Dream Team of the Canadian Brass?
ML: I grew up with the Canadian Brass, listening to the recordings and watching the shows! They brought a lot to the brass world. They totally put brass quintets as a world class chamber group. It's an honour for me to be part of the Trumpet Dream Team of the Canadian Brass.

PB: Are you the first lady to be a member of the Canadian Brass?
ML: Yes and I got a lot of attention from it. I hope this has a good influence on young women brass players, so many of them come to talk to me after concerts. There are already many great women brass players and I'm happy to see more and more women playing brass instruments, performing as soloists, in orchestras and teaching. This is encouraging for young women who want to become professional musicians.

PB: I first met you in Banff at the 2006 ITG Conference and may I offer congratulations for superb performances of the Narrative Composer and the world premiere of Legend with Strings when you performed with Alain Trudel and Jennifer Suce.
ML: Thank you. I'm really happy to have been invited to play at the opening concert gala. That evening, I played two pieces that I like and I was lucky enough to play under the direction of a friend of mine, Alain Trudel. Thanks to Jens Lindemann for inviting me to play at the opening night concert! I would like to mention that the Enesco Legend's arrangement from Alvin Lowrey is now published at Hickman Music Editions in the United States.

PB: I always have to ask this question - what instruments and mouthpiece do you play on?
ML: I play on a Yamaha Xeno gold plated Bb trumpet and a Yamaha Xeno Chicago C trumpet. On the piccolo, I play Yamaha long bell and on the Eb, I play Schilke, model E3L. My principal mouthpiece is a SC Bach modified by Stork, screw rim, wider rim, open bore and open backbore.

PB: What are your musical plans for the immediate future?
ML: To continue what I do best: playing trumpet and teaching! More precisely, I'm working on two different solo projects that I'm really excited about. Let's speak again in some months and I will share some other details!

PB: Marion, thank you so much for taking time out to share this with me and Brass Herald readers. It's been a great pleasure to interview you.
ML: Thank you, Philip.